KHATTAR KAKA

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Chapter 1
RAMAYANA

Uncle was cleaning *kismis* (dried grapes) for munching during Ramnavami celebrations.

"Uncle, would you like to come for Rama's story recital tonight in the public ground?" I asked.

"Which part?"

"Sita's *vanavas,* banishment to the forest."

"Then, no. I won't go."

"Why uncle? Rama, the righteous, the noblest among the human beings, was personification of unparalleled virtues, wasn't he?"

"He was, surely! How to condemn a weak woman to a life of grief? How to banish a wife away from home? Cut the nose of a woman? In a way, his life of valour began by making a woman cry and ended too similarly," Uncle said.

"Uncle, God took birth as man and went through all those trials, didn't he?"

"Could he have not done those things without being so harsh? In truth, you can't really blame him alone for those deeds. His misfortune was that at the very beginning of his life he had a teacher like Viswamitra who started his instruction to Rama with the killing of Tataka. Otherwise, would Rama's first arrow have been aimed at a woman? Viswamitra's were all unusual ways. He wanted to prove that his name indicated friendliness. So, the rules of grammar had to be changed to accommodate that. In order to scale up from Rajarshi to Brahmarshi, he changed the caste rules. In competing with Vasishta, he dumped morality and good conduct in the river Karmanasa. A man such as him, what education could he impart to Rama? How could he convey to others what he himself did not possess?" Uncle said.

"Uncle, Rama was embodiment of justice. He did not hesitate to banish his wife to the forest in the cause of justice, didn't he?"

"No, son. The contrary was true. In fact, it was a habit with his dynasty. His father banished him to the forest. Rama did the same to his wife. You said justice, didn't you? Do you mean that it's justice to hang someone just because someone said something? If he was interested in justice, he should have summoned both the parties to the royal court and should have weighed the evidence of either side

dispassionately. He didn't do that. Quietly, he sent away Sita to the forest. What justice was this? What ideal was this? Sita, the queen, didn't even have the rights of a commoner!"

"But Rama had to demonstrate the ideal of bowing to the people's wish…"

"That hardly was the case. People of Ayodhya never wanted Sita to be banished from the kingdom. That's why she had to be taken out in the chariot at the dead of night. And Lakshmana was ever ready. He was ready with the sword to cut Surpanaka's nose! Ready with the chariot to take Sita to the forest! When the news was out in the morning, there was commotion in Ayodhya. But Rama was obstinate. He wouldn't hear the prayers of the people, would he? He didn't care for anyone's words when he had to go to the forest. Then, why would he do that in the case of Sita?"

"Uncle! He went to the forest in order to fulfil his father's promise."

"Try some logic. What is exile? Living in many forests or in one forest? He didn't follow *vanavas* in the sense of the former. If it were in the latter sense, he should have lived in a forest close to Ayodhya or lived in Chitrakoot for fourteen years. That would have sufficed to comply with his father's word. Where was the need for him to roam about thousands of miles? That too by foot, taking along the dainty Sita with him! When Gautama, the legal scholar of Mithila, posed this very question to him, Rama had no answer. On top of it, he cursed, 'Those who study Gautama's logic would be born a jackal.' What response was this? Did logical debate mean howling like a jackal? If Rama had studied the law of the land of Mithila, he wouldn't have been so unjust."

Cutting the coconut kernel into pieces, Uncle resumed his talk. "Assuming that the people unanimously demanded banishment of Sita, what should Rama have done? He knew that his consort was blemishless and had come out of the ordeal by fire unscathed. Then how did it matter what the world said? He should have stood firm. If he suspected that the people would revolt, he ought to have enthroned Bharatha and retired to the forest with his wife. That would have been recognised as an ideal. Rama as a king understood the nature of the kingdom but not the love of his wife. Queen Sita, in deference to her duty as a wife, trifled the kingdom. But Rama the king could not forsake the throne in obedience to his duty as a husband. An English king (Edward the Eighth) gave up the throne in order to marry a woman (Simpson) he loved. Rama could not measure up to that English king."

"Uncle! You seem to be hurt by Sita's banishment to the forest."

"Why not? Sita's whole life was one of grief. She hardly had any good time. First, she roamed about the forests with her husband. Then when she was settling down to live in the palace, she was bundled out. When he was in the forests, he cried for her all over. He got a bridge built across the ocean. But after returning from Lanka, Sita could not stay at home. That's why people of Mithila say that their girls should not be given in marriage to those who live in the west."

There were tears in Uncle's eyes. He was upset. "Such neglect for a queen like Sita? In thought, word and deed she was devoted to Rama. She followed his footsteps. She walked about the dangerous forests with him. She jumped into the leaping fire to appease him. And before jumping into the fire, she said, 'If in thought, word and deed I always worshipped Rama, O! Lord of Fire, you know my purity. For my sake become cool like sandal.' It happened like that only. The leaping flames turned cool like the sandal.

"She came out shining like pure gold. Yet, against such a chaste woman, how cruelly did he behave? She was thrown out when she was pregnant for eight months. We must applaud such cruelty! Sita, being born in Mithila, was not the one to be easily irritated. That's why she tolerated all this. If she were from any other area, she would have shown her might. Hey, tell me this. If the idea was to break their relationship, he could have sent her to her father's place. Couldn't he? Instead, why did he pack her off to such a dense forest? She entered the nether world because she had no hope of justice here. She was consumed by the same earth from which she was born. Should the life of a wife, who was by all means most virtuous, end like this? No wonder, the earth cracked up and took her in."

I tried to mollify Uncle. "The washerman was the reason for all this."

Uncle saw red. "Tell me this. If a washerman falls off the donkey, I wouldn't throw your aunt out of our home, would I? Rama actually spent most of his time in the company of creatures such as Nishad, Kevat, Bhillini, eagle, bear, monkey and the like, didn't he? Because of a foolish maid servant's words, a father banished his son to the forest. And this man sent his wife away to live in the forest because of the prattle of a mindless washerman. In their court, the petty held sway – Mandhara at home and Durmukah, Rama's spy, outside."

"Uncle, it was done to uphold morality…"

"Not morality. Say, immorality. If morality was the ideal, why did he shoot Vali hiding behind the tree? He should have engaged him in a face to face battle and killed him. What happened to the vow that 'Men of Raghu dynasty do not fear Lord Yama also'? That's why Vali sarcastically said, '*Mahatma*! You are born to protect *dharma*, righteousness, but you have killed me like a *vyadha*, a hunter (treacherously).'

"If the idea was to punish Vali for his misdeed of taking Sugriva's wife, Tara, then why did he not kill Sugriva who also was guilty of the same offence? The writer of Ramayana had to accept the mistake. 'Sugriva was guilty of the same offence as Vali, for which Rama killed Vali like a vyadha. Vibhishana also committed the same offence of marrying Mandodari after Ravana's death. But even in his dreams, Rama wouldn't consider these as misdeeds.' Finally, who was awarded the death sentence? The pious Sambuka, who was engaged in penance!"

"But Rama was the noblest of all the human beings and he upheld morality…"

"You say so but I consider he was quite hasty. Why, like a child, did he run after the golden stag? Pining for Sita, why did he cry roaming about in the forest? Sugriva was a friend and yet he was ready to rain arrows on him for the delay in finding Sita. He strung the bow against Samudra too in haste. When Lakshmana was felled in the battle field, he cried piteously. Does it behove the brave to lose their equanimity like this?"

Uncle began to shell the *badam* and said, "After a careful consideration, it appears to me that Rama was not at fault. Actually, his father Dasaratha was a hasty man too. He went out hunting. He heard a sound on the river bank. And immediately he drew the bow, placed the arrow on the string and released it pulling it to the ear in the direction whence the sound came. It didn't occur to him that he could be shooting a man. Poor Sravanakumar was killed and his blind father died of heartbreak. And, as a result, Dasaratha too had to die of the pangs of separation from his own son. Look at this. When he had two queens, for what fun did he think of marrying another in ripe old age? 'For an old man, a young wife is dearer than his own life.' He was so smitten of Kaikeyi that even when he went to war, he made her sit beside him in the chariot. What kind of a chariot was it! It broke just at the nick of time! His name was *Dasaratha* but he didn't have a single *rath* (chariot) which was useful. Otherwise, where was the need for Kaikeyi to put her wrist in the wheel and hold the chariot from crumbling? Her wrist indeed was strong! It didn't snap even when it was put in the axle. Her heart too was no less. Because of her prowess, the old king's life was

somehow saved. Then without a second thought, he promised her that he would give whatever she wished. He didn't have the sense to think what he would do if she wanted him to get her a star in the sky. Afterwards, when she asked for Rama's banishment, he was mightily upset. By the way, it must be said that Kaikeyi was quite reasonable. If she were to ask him to give his heart, what would the righteous Dasaratha have done? This is not all. Having given the word, what made him beat his chest? Anyway, after fourteen years, his son would have ruled the kingdom again, wouldn't he? He should have waited patiently until then. If his love for the son was so overwhelming, he too should have joined and gone along with Rama to the forest. He didn't do any of that. '*Haa* Rama, *haa* Rama' he wailed and died. Would a Kshatriya's heart be ever so weak?"

Uncle wouldn't leave a job half done. Now he was after Dasaratha, I thought and said, "Uncle! Everyone learns lessons from the characters in Ramayana…"

"I too will learn lessons: That I shouldn't release the arrow without seeing the object; shouldn't give a boon without thinking and shouldn't beat the chest in despair after promising."

"Uncle! You are only looking at the frailties."

"Well, show me the virtues."

"King Dasaratha was a man of truth…"

"True. So truthful that he tried to fool Sravanakumar's blind father by impersonating that he was Sravanakumar!"

"Rama was such a devout son…"

"Yes. He didn't come even after he heard the news of his father's death. Despite being the eldest son, he didn't perform the last rites and instead moved down southward undeterred."

"Lakshmana was such dedicated brother…"

"True. He aimed the arrow at one brother (Bharatha) for the sake of another (Rama)."

"Bharatha sacrificed…"

"Bharatha didn't bother to know what happened to his brother for fourteen years. He didn't have the leisure in the capital in order to go and find out in the forest, did he? If only he had taken out the army, would Rama have had to seek the help of the monkeys?"

"Hanuman was devout…"

"Yes. He left the first master, Sugriva, and devoted himself to the service of Rama."

"Vibhishana, such an ideal…'

"Yes. He has become the reason for the adage, 'The house spy would be the cause of Lanka's destruction'. Pray god that the country should be saved of such Vibhishanas."

"You mean to say there is not a single ideal character in Ramayana?"

"Why not? In the whole of Ramayana, I can think of only one ideal character."

"Who?"

Uncle smiled. "Ravana," he said.

"Uncle! You always joke."

"No joke. Cite one blemish of Ravana."

"You're great uncle! Everyone sees so many faults in Ravana but you seem to find not a single flaw in him, do you?"

"Come on. Out with it."

"He seized Sita by force and took her away…"

"That was done to teach your virtuous, *purushotthama,* that the nose of a sister of another ought not to be cut; that while living in an alien land you shouldn't court enmity with others; that you shouldn't run after mirages and that you shouldn't insult any woman. Look at this! Ravana took Sita to Lanka but he didn't humiliate her. He didn't take her to his palace. He put her in Asoka Park. Everybody might call him a *rakshasa*, demon, but such decent behaviour is seldom seen among the human beings."

"Uncle! You always speak contrary to what people believe. You're arguing in support of one who committed such a heinous crime and blame the ocean of kindness that's Sitapati…"

"Say stone-hearted Sitapati. What happened to the princess of Vaidehi, who left for Ayodhya after marriage? She didn't have the fortune of returning to her parents' home. That's why we keep off people of the west, don't we?"

"Uncle! You're biased against the relatives of Sita from her husband's side. If you saw Rama, you would at least put your palms together in salutation, wouldn't you?"

"How would I do that? I'm a Brahmin and he, a Kshatriya. I, of course, would have blessed him, "May you be filled with good thoughts. If hereafter people talk of

Ramarajya, don't give them scope to say, 'Chee! Chee! Rama Rama'. I'd advise him to employ a Brahmin like me as his minister."

"But Uncle, Ramarajya means an ideal state, doesn't it?"

"True, Tulsidas wrote, 'There are no wretched, poor, sorrowful persons in Ramarajya.' But I would have added, 'Except for poor Sita who was the most unfortunate.' If our village administration is run on the lines of Ramarajya, we can't say how many Sitas would be consumed by the earth."

"Uncle! Since you celebrate Sriramanavami you must have devotion in your mind."

"Yes, but that's for Sita. But for Sita, Rama would have been acclaimed only as '*Raghupati Raghava Rajaram*'. He wouldn't have been called '*Patita pavana Sitaram*'. Every Kshatriya king would routinely do whatever Rama did. Just in respect of one matter, he was an exception. He did not take another wife. He got a gold statue of Janaki made and spent the rest of his life looking at it. For this reason, I would forgive him of all his misdeeds. Rama's greatness was due to Sita. That's why, first Sita and then Rama. Tulsidas said, 'I would raise my hands, put my palms together hands and pray assuming that the entire creation is pervaded by Sita and Rama.' Valmiki also says, 'Pray Sita and her husband.'"

"Uncle. You are so devoted to Sita. Why then do you criticise Rama? You don't spare his father too."

Uncle broke into a smile and said, "Arey, don't you understand this small little thing? I'm from her mother's place. The criticism of the barber from the mother-in-law's place also is also acceptable. And I'm a Brahmin. Could anyone else venture to talk like me? People of Mithila would always pour scorn on the people of Ayodhya. Even god can't make us shut up."

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Chapter 2
MAHABHARATA

I was reading my morning *sloka*. 'Emperor Nala was a man of virtue. Yudhistara was a virtuous person.'

Just then, *vikatakavi* Uncle arrived and said, "Arey! Why are you chanting the names of worthless persons?"

"Uncle, why do you speak like that about a preceptor like *Dharmaraju*?'

"Not Dharmaraju but a foolish king. What else do you call a person who roamed about the trees and mounds of forests after losing the kingdom as also his wife in the game of dice? Only Nala was a match to him who also lost everything in the game of gambling and roamed about the forests. He ran away leaving his half naked wife while she was asleep. Nala and Yudhistara were like oxen who should to be tied to the same yoke. Whoever created the sloka has nicely put them together."

"Uncle, in Mahabharatha, Dharmaraju is an ideal character. There's much that could be learnt from him."

"Yes. The first thing that can be learnt is that one incompetent fellow is sufficient to completely ruin a dynasty. If Dharmaraju was not a gambler, would such a destructive war at all have taken place?"

"Everyone says that the war occurred due to the injustice meted out by the Kauravas but you alone however have put the blame on Dharmaraju's head."

"Just think for a while. If Dharmaraju was not fond of gambling, would all that have happened? Excited, he kept on throwing the dice. Finally, he staked his wife too. Arey! Everyone would provoke a fool. What happened to his sense? Did it wander away to munch grass somewhere? What's the mistake of others if he lost the game? After he lost, he should have simply sat in a corner. But he wanted the throne. What justice was this?"

"Uncle! There was so much injustice meted out to Draupadi. Why don't you consider that?" I said.

Uncle was quick to respond. "Why don't you look at her fault? When Duryodhana came to take a look at the palace, he was under a momentary delusion and mistook the new marble floor for water. She watched him, laughed loudly at his discomfiture and jibed, 'The son of a blind man would of course be blind.' Tell me, was she

justified in uttering this? These words were so insulting. Would any well mannered woman of the clan say such things about her father-in-law and the brothers-in-law? Draupadi, who was arrogant because of her beauty, had no sense of what to say and what not to say. She ordered all the Pandavas alike. In fact, she would have gone berserk. But Kauravas were not the ones to bear the insults like the Pandavas. They were born to their own father. So, they merrily took revenge."

"But Yudhistara was the son of *Dharma* himself, wasn't he?"

"Not *Dharmaputra*. He was *Adharmaputra*. Why do you repeatedly say, 'Dharmaraju'? You call Yudhistara, who did not hesitate to take Draupadi as his wife whom Arjuna had married in *swayamavara*, Dharmaraju? It's apt to call him *Adharmaraju*."

"But that was because of the order of their mother Kunthi to share *it* among all the five equally, wasn't it?"

Uncle was emotional. "Arey! Was Panchali *panchamrith prasad* or what to be distributed like that? We must feel happy that the five limbs of Draupadi were not distributed, which would have made her position much worse. Anyway, she suffered a lot, didn't she? One woman amongst five men, all the five having a right over her. Not as a woman but like a *hukka*, over which they had a joint right, who could have a go at it making gurgling sound? Did this behove men of honour? In truth, Pandavas were immoral. They spoiled the clan.

"That's why Karna said in the royal court that Panchali was not a wife but a concubine. 'O, son of Kuru! Gods have ordered that a woman should have one husband but she is under the control of many. So, without doubt, she is a concubine,' he said."

"Uncle, Kauravas were so unfair. Dussasana actually tried to disrobe her in the royal court. What could be a worse humiliation than this?"

"If one ponders over the matter deeply, it was Yudhistara who actually humiliated her. He bid her in the game of dice, describing her publicly, 'I bid my wife, who is neither short nor tall, neither lean nor stout (that means medium built), and has dark curly hair.' Only a pimp would describe his wife like that.

"Afterwards, Dussasana had the opportunity to take revenge. He caught hold of her long hair and brought her to the royal assembly dragging her along.

'Dragging Pandavas' wife, Draupadi, who had extremely long hair…'

"Do you know how Draupadi chided Yudhistara then?

'Who will bet his wife in a game of dice, except a foolish king, who forgets himself intoxicated by the vice of gambling?'

"When Dussasana dragged her to the court, her body slightly bent, in a low voice, Draupadi said, 'O! Foolish fellow! Now I'm menstruating. I've only one robe. O! *anaarya*! How would you take me to the court?'

"To which Dussasana said, 'I don't care whether you're menstruating or whether you have one robe or none at all. Yagnaseni, we have won you in the game of dice. Now you're our servant. Your place is in the company of our servants. We'll do what we wish to do with you.'

"In the struggle that followed, Draupadi's hair was dishevelled. Half her sari slipped off and fell down. Poor one, she, whose waist was so small, covering her chest with her hands, piteously pleaded, 'Don't disrobe me. Don't pull my sari,' while angrily looking at her husbands. Yet, Dussasana pushed her to the centre of the court, forcibly pulled at her sari and began to disrobe her. When Draupadi was being disrobed in the open court, Pandavas remained mum. When their wife was being humiliated thus, they sat with equanimity, without exhibiting any emotion. They didn't assert themselves."

"Uncle! The time was not opportune for them to show their courage."

Uncle rebuked me. "Arey! What could be more opportune time than that? If they had a little courage, they would have staked their life there. They should have pounced on Dussasana. Maybe they would have all died; maybe they would have all been completely ravaged. When else would Arjuna's *gandiv* (bow) and Bhima's mace have been of use?"

Uncle was agitated for some time. Then he said, "That's why Draupadi scornfully said once, 'I've no husbands,' and wept covering her face with hands. She shed tears so copiously that her robust breasts, which were elegant and well endowed, were totally drenched of tears. Yet, their husbands were not overwhelmed. They kept staring at her like impotent persons. That's why Urvasi once insulted Arjuna thus, 'You are not a man. You're impotent. Forget self esteem and go and dance with women as one of them'."

"But Uncle, Pandavas were famous for their valour. Arjuna, in particular."

Cracking areca nut, Uncle said, "How do I count them as heroes when they were not upset even after seeing their wife work as an attendant in the court of King of Virata? If Arjuna was brave, would he shave off the beard and the moustache, wear a

long skirt and jacket and teach dance to the princess? And Bhima was a glutton. It was enough if his stomach was full. If this was the status of the elders, what could be said of Nakula and Sahadeva?"

"But uncle, they were then in *agnatavasa*, in cognito"

"Truth to say, they were not fit to show their face to anyone. Arjuna carried away Subhadra, Krishna's sister, even though Krishna protected Draupadi's modesty, and was the benefactor of the Pandavas. He didn't even think that she was the daughter of his maternal uncle. And Bhima forcibly took away his uncle's daughter (Sisupala's sister). They had no qualms about righteousness, morality and manners."

Uncle noticed that I was disconsolate. He said, "Upon deep consideration, it is clear that the origin of Pandavas is steeped in immorality.

'Pandavas were illegitimate and born to paramours.'

"Pandavas' father Pandu was incapacitated from producing children. So, he invited five gods who impregnated Kunthi and Madri. That's how Pandavas were born. Arey, instead of this, Pandu king should have died issueless. Why did he crave for the continuation of the dynasty, that too with the help of others, when he had one hundred children born to his brother? If Pandu also was content like Bhishma, there would have been no occasion for a war for the throne. Sons of Dhrutarashtra would have ruled the kingdom. But Pandu was jaundice- eyed. His illegitimate progeny destroyed the dynasty."

I knew uncle was having a dig at Pandavas. What can I argue with him? So I began reading a hymn. 'Those who repeat the sacred names of the five *kanya*s, Ahalya, Draupadi, Tara, Kunthi and Mandodari would be cleansed of all their sins.'

Uncle intervened. "These five women were married. How come they are called kanyas (virgins)? And what prompts you say that they are worthy of remembering every morning?"

"Because they were chaste and virtuous."

"Who among them was chaste? Ahalya tuned into a stone for straying. Tara and Mandodari fell into the arms of their brothers-in-law. About Kunthi and Draupadi, less said the better."

"Kunthi had intercourse with five persons. It was the same with Draupadi too. Yet both are recognised as chaste and virtuous. Only the lucky ones would acquire fame! Mother-in-law satisfied the desire of five persons. The daughter-in-law was no less. She too satisfied the love of five.

"Arey! Draupadi used to change husbands like the cards. She lived life like a queen of ace, controlling her husbands and lording over them. Once while walking in the forest, she suddenly fell down. Yudhistara looked at her and cried, 'Chee! What a fool I am! Addicted to gambling, I am roaming in the forest like this with this delicate woman. It's due to my wrong thoughts that she has fallen on the ground.'

"Bhima, Nakula and others hoisted her on their shoulders and began to walk. If she were the wife of just one man, would she have had such luxury? And she, the wife of five husbands, gave a son to each."

"In the time of Mahabharatha, did women have such freedom?"

"Where's the doubt? Look at this -

'Kunthi gave birth to a son when she was with still at her father's home. Afterwards King Pandu married her. First, a son was born. Then she got married.'

"Her daughter-in-law courted only one in *swayamvara* and yet she had to live as the wife of five men. Kunthi's grandson Abhimanyu's wife Uttara gave birth to Parikshit just after seven months of marriage. Arey! The stories of the great houses would be great too. Those days, young princesses vied with one another in willingly getting eloped. Amba, Ambika, Ambalika were mature girls. Young Subhadra was lifted off the fair that was held on Raivataka mountain. You know well about Damayanthi and Sakunthala. The present generation cannot hold a candle to the romance of Devayani and Sarmishta. Banasaura's daughter, Usha, was so audacious that she forcibly got Aniruddha into her bed room and –

'She satisfied her lust, caring little whether it was day or night.'

"Arey! What all do you want me to recount? Mahabharatha is full of such stories. In the epics and puranas, how could there be mention of ordinary wives?"

"Uncle! What are the lessons that can be learnt from Mahabharata?"

"One lesson is this -

'When the women of the dynasty are blameworthy, cross breeding occurs. They destroy the race. (Like the sons of Pandu). When the race is destroyed, the age old rules of the caste will be lost.'"

"Uncle, how did the wives of king Pandu become reproachful?"

"Their husbands were the reason for their fate. The fad these days is family planning has become but those days *niyoga* was. That means the scriptures permitted intercourse with others for the sake of progeny. This was because those times protection of the race was considered more important than being chaste. It was

said, 'The childless will go to the hell.' That's why king Pandu commanded his wives to have sons through someone. It's more appropriate to say he implored. Look at how he cajoled Kunthi-

'Sin would attach to a woman who does not go to another man even after being ordered by her husband.'

"He also cited many examples.

'O! My love! Swetaketu, son of Uddalaka, said this method to be in accordance with dharma. When Saudasa asked his wife to follow this method for begetting a son, she obeyed in order to satisfy his wish.'

"King Pandu finally made a mention of his mother (Ambalika) and said, 'O! Lotus-eyed, you know that I too was born through niyoga method, don't you?'

"When such was the situation, what would Kunthi or Madri do? They obeyed the command of their husband and followed in the footsteps of their mother-in-law."

"Uncle, why did King Pandu's mother do like that?"

"She did it because of the command of her mother-in-law, Satyavati. Consider what Satyavati said to her daughter-in-law -

'O! The beautiful one! Bharatha dynasty is becoming extinct. Please rejuvenate it. Give birth through someone to a son, who can rival Indra in his prowess.'

"That's not all. She recommended a suitable person in Vyasa for this pious deed. Though whom did she convey this recommendation? Through Ambalika's brother-in-law, Bhisma. When she found that Bhishma was hesitant, she smiled and said, "I'll reveal a secret to you. I was known by the name Matsyagandhi in my youth. One day, sage Parasara got into my boat to cross river Yamuna. When he saw me, lust overcame him. But how could he satisfy his desire in broad day light in front of others? Then, with his yogic powers, he created a cover of thick fog all around and fulfilled his desire. And a son was born to me due to that union. That son is Vyasa. Go and fetch Vyasa.'

'O! Bhishma! Vyasa who is appointed with your consent would impregnate Vichitraveerya's widows (Ambika, Ambalika) and make them give birth to sons.'

"Then Vyasa was summoned. With his semen, Dhritarashtra and Pandu were born. During the intercourse, Ambika closed her eyes. That's why she gave birth to a blind son. Ambalika had smeared her body with sandal. So she gave birth to Pandu. Vyasa was more satisfied with Ambalika. That's why he was partial to Pandavas."

"Despite being such a learned man, why did Vyasa agree to the act of adultery?"

"Look! *Atma* will take shape of son. Vyasa's father Parasara also did the same, didn't he?

"Lustfully, the sage caught hold of Matsyagandhi. The poor fisher woman was frightened and she asked him, 'You would fulfil your desire, enjoy and desert me. If I become pregnant, what would I say to my father? Please tell me.'

"Then Parasara blessed her-

'O! Woman! The son who would be born to you would be well versed in the Vedas and would be the author of the epics and would be renowned in all the three worlds.'

"That son was Vyasa. He was born in an island. So, he's called Dwaipayana. How would Dwaipayana Vyasa renounce his father's culture? When the servant maid in the royal palace satisfied his lust to his heart's content, he blessed her: 'From your womb, a son will be born who would be righteous and truthful.'

"That's why in Mahabharatha, Vyasa praises Vidura a great deal. Have you noticed this?

"Look son! The after effects of adultery are never beneficial. That's why Vyasa repented.

'Will these sons born due to adultery be any good?'

"Even Arjuna repented, 'Because of the problems that arise due to cross breeding, the system will be corrupted.'

"Arey! A blemish to the race cannot be wiped out quickly. One has to do penance to obliterate it."

Uncle paused and said, "Look! Son! The world blindly follows the acts of the predecessors. Ambalika learnt from Satyavati. Kunthi learnt from Ambalika. And from Kunthi, Draupati learnt. Like this, because of this strange tradition in the lineage of Vichitraveerya, the women became blameworthy. Everyone knows the destruction caused by the cross-bred sons. Mahabharatha is a work which needs to be recapitulated. Is there anything which is not there in it? There is nothing in the land of Bharatha that's not there in Mahabharatha."

"Uncle, but the main person responsible for Mahabharatha war was Krishna, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Arjuna went berserk because of his support, like a calf prancing about while tethered to the stake. If it was a just war, Pandavas wouldn't have won it at all. Krishna, who was cunning, didn't allow it to be fair. From the beginning to the end it was an unfair war. The slaying of Karna, Drona, Bhishma and Jayadratha was unjust.

Yet, the Gita says, '*Dharma kshetre Kurukshetre*'. To me this is definitely height of sarcasm. Vyasa said, 'Victory belongs to the just.' But in Mahabharatha, the unjust were rewarded with victory. That's why the victory too was transient."

I said, "The root cause of Mahabharatha war was Dussasana disrobing Draupadi."

"Yes, yes. Mahabharata war ensued when Dussasana tugged at one sari! But when Srikrishna stole away so many saris, it became pure Bhagavatham! But one has to pay for one's actions some day. He romanced with so many *gopika*s. In the end, cowherds plundered his wives and took them away with them. Just hear this –

'After the avatar of Krishna ended, Arjuna was taking Krishna's wives from Dwaraka to Hastinapur. They were waylaid by the cowherds. The cowherds not only looted their wealth but also took away Krishna's wives. Arjuna who was their protector kept on watching helplessly.'

"What happened to his valour? Time tames the proud. It doesn't allow anyone's pride to stay intact."

Uncle took a deep breath and resumed. "Look at how fortunes fluctuate. Srikrishna, who killed so many *asuras* in his life time, fell to the arrow of a hunter. The hunter mistook him for a deer under a tree and shot him. His queens were plundered like the cattle. Do we call this the nature's retribution or the fruits of one's acts?

"The Puranas proclaim that Srikrishna lessened the burden of the earth by creating a rift between the brothers and close relations and make them kill one another.

"But what was the result of this for Yadunanadana? His dynasty also was destroyed like that of others. The fruit of Kurukshetra was obtained in Prabhasakshetra.

"Due to the internecine fights among the bothers, parents and friends, everyone perished and Yadu dynasty ended. There was none in the dynasty even to wail. Arey! A poisonous tree will yield only poisonous fruits; never fruits of nectar."

Uncle pushed snuff deep into the nostrils and said, "One who is the cause injustice would not be spared. The Pandavas were finished off in the Himalayas for that reason. Yudhistara did not carry the splendour of his kingdom with him on his last journey. Just a dog accompanied him! What was the result of enmity with brothers and the ensuing killings? Yet, we don't open our eyes. Pray god to protect the land of Bharatha from recurrence of such a war."

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Chapter 3
BHAGAVADGITA

Uncle saw Bhagavadgita in my hand and said, “You seem to read the Gita these days, my son? If you do, I must keep off from you.”

Surprised, I said, “Why, Uncle?”

“Look, young man. Initially, Arjuna was all love and affection. ‘These are my brothers, these are my uncles and he is our grandfather. How do I fight against these persons?’ he thought and hesitated. After drinking the *savam* (nectar) of the Gita, he rained arrows at his old grandfather, making a sieve of his chest. That’s why if a problem stares at you, turn indifferent, like Arjuna, and think - ‘the soul cannot be destroyed by the arrows or weapons, or fire cannot set it ablaze,’ and believing that ‘since Uncle’s soul cannot be destructed by any weapon, why not hit him with a long axe’ and then if your aunt cries, console her by saying, ‘….’

“And you say, ‘Aunt! Uncle’s body has been transformed. He has acquired a new body. So it’s time you felt happy and celebrated the naming ceremony.’

“And if the younger lot in the village followed the Gita, it would become difficult to say how many uncles would be killed and how many aunts would be rendered widows. That’s why I must keep away from you. If you are indeed fond of reading, read ‘Gita Govindam’ instead. Don’t fancy reading the Gita.”

“Uncle, it’s said that the Gita advocates non violence and renunciation. Isn’t that true?”

“Arey! What I know is this. If after the Gita discourse, Arjuna had thrown off the Gandivam and wore saffron clothes, removed the sheath and picked up kamandal, left Kurukshetra for Varahakshetra, then I would have agreed that the Gita preaches non violence and renunciation. But instead of this, Arjuna, like the Matsya Yantra, began to chop off the heads of relatives and friends.

“Arey, these days, people are out with spears and lances for no reason at all. And if they hear the Gita, then every village would turn into Kurukshetra. That’s why I fold my hands and say don’t read the Gita when you are young and hot-blooded.”

“Uncle, but the preacher of the Gita thought differently, didn’t he?”

Uncle was irritated. “How do I know the other view? Was the preacher not there in the chariot as the charioteer? If he wanted to preach non violence, why didn’t he

divert the chariot from the battlefield? And why didn't he say - 'Arjuna, after my revelation to you that the body is ephemeral and that the world is worthless, why hanker after Hastinapur? It would one day become a part of the rubble. Why do you allow blood to flow? The worldly pleasures are despicable. Don't covet the kingdom. Does it behove you to shoot arrows at your old grandfather and the revered Drona for the sake of the kingdom? What if you don't fight this war? The world would merely laugh at you that you ran off the battlefield despite being a Kshatriya. That's all, isn't it? But a man of wisdom shall not be affected by praise or scorn. Just leave this dispute. Come away with me to the Himalayas.' He didn't say any of these. Instead, he coaxed him to fight. Yet, you think the Gita preaches non violence and renunciation. Huh, what sense? And, what knowledge?"

"Uncle! Many important people are seeking to establish peace in the world through the Gita. But you, on the contrary, see only a message of war in it. Why this dichotomy?"

Uncle smiled and said, "Have you heard our epic 'Alha'? Those who recite it would make the listeners' adrenalin rise rapidly and stoke passions and proclaim, 'Finally, whatever god has destined would happen. One day everybody has to depart.' Roused by these exhortations, many in the past sacrificed their lives. In the Gita too I hear the same message.

'The bodies in which the soul resided surely have to die some day but the soul never perishes. It's indestructible. So, Arjuna, fight.'

"I don't like the logic that since death is inevitable, die today."

"Uncle, what God said is that the soul never dies," I said.

"If the soul has no death, why is a murderer sentenced to death by hanging? And, Srikrishna lectures to Arjuna like this-

'The wise mourn not for those who are alive and they mourn not for those who die.'

"But where did such realisation disappear when Abhimanyu was killed?

'There is no birth or death for the soul. It was there some time and wasn't there at some other time. It doesn't change. It's permanent. It always exists in its own form. Death is for the body, not for the soul.'

"If this was true, why did he have to resort to such deception in order to take revenge on Jayadratha? Then –

'…'

'The sage who is unaffected by sorrow, who has no craving for desires and who is bereft of affection, fear and anger is a person of equanimity.'

"I know you are still too young to understand all these things but why did he forget this?"

I said, "Uncle! This sloka is famous, isn't it?-

'...'

'The Upanishads are the cows. Krishna, the cowherd milks them. The milk is the nectar of the Gita. Arjuna, who was brave, drank this milk.'"

Uncle laughed and said, "Yes, Arjuna was innocent like the calf. That's why Krishna prevailed upon him to wage the war, didn't he? In a way, the Gita was meant to fool Arjuna. Srikrishna was keen on the engagement. He patted Arjuna's back. And as the war progressed, he watched it in amusement. Krishna's blue colour enveloped Arjuna so much that the whole race was set afire."

"Uncle, Arjuna fought the war disinterestedly and not with an eye on the kingdom."

Uncle said sarcastically, "True. That's why he has transferred Hastinapur kingdom to you, hasn't he? Arey, if he was disinterested, would he have got coronated stained with the blood of hundreds of his cousins? O! Delhi! The fort is red until today because of the blood shed there!"

"Uncle! You're great. You have digressed, haven't you?'

Uncle was not the one to let things go. He continued, "Look. Krishna was keen on the war. Arjuna had no mind of his own. So, Krishna went on telling whatever came to his mind. 'Body is ephemeral. So fight. Soul has no death. Therefore, fight. You're a Kshatriya. So fight. If you don't fight, you'll be blamed. So, fight.'"

Uncle smiled and resumed. "Krishna preaches Arjuna that for a Kshatriya, it's better to die in the battlefield than to run away from it. But he couldn't fight Jarasandha and ran off to Dwaraka. That's why even now he's known as 'ranchod'. Advising others is a scholarly activity! And, did Arjuna have the sense to stand up to him? No. He heard him intently. When even after hearing everything, Arjuna failed to understand, Krishna showed him his ghoulish self implying, 'If you don't understand my words, understand at least after this.'

"I recall once your aunt wished to have a dip in the Ganga waters at Kasi. A child of five years of age, who was with her then, was hell bent on going with her. I tried to dissuade him a lot saying, 'Don't go. The current in the river is strong; that children

will get carried away by the stream; that there are crocodiles in the water and they will catch you.' When he didn't relent for long, I put on the mask of the demon in Ramaleela and scared him off. The moment he saw that he became sensible. I don't see much difference between that child and Arjuna."

"Uncle! There's so much jnana yoga, bhakti yoga, karma yoga (knowledge, devotion, action) in the Gita. Is that not so?"

"The aim of all yogas is this. Fight the war. Kill the Kauravas. In order to prepare Arjuna for the war, Krishna wove a huge web of nishkama karma (action without expecting any reward) and anasakta yoga (act disinterestedly). Once Arjuna's mind was caught in that web, Krishna made him dance to his tune. But a sensible person would not fail to notice Krishna's trickery."

"But I can't understand why Krishna, the God, had to fool Arjuna?"

"Are you alone in saying this? Not at all. Even the renowned scholars failed to understand this. But I do clearly understand this. Krishna says –

'...'

'Arjuna! If you die, you will go to heaven. If you win, you'll enjoy princely comforts. Either way, it's beneficial to you. Therefore, with determination, wage the war.'"

Uncle smiled and said, "Arjuna had not studied logic. That's why he got caught in the net of the two paths. If it were me, I would have asked, 'Hey! Ocean of kindness! Beside these two, there could be a third consequence also. If Arjuna was caught and imprisoned, then what? Neither heaven nor kingdom. Wouldn't it mean that he would have been finished off?' But Arjuna could only see the straight path. What if the god had encountered a logician like Pakshadhar Misra? I would have asked, 'My Lord. When all the desires are futile, why do you allow the chariot to roll?'

"Uncle, you have fetish for questioning the logic of everything, don't you?"

"Why not? This is the chief occupation in our country, isn't it? Who else has such subtle sense to both condemn and support the same thing?"

Cracking the nuts, Uncle said, "Look at what Krishna said at one place-

'...'

'Whoever endures pleasure and pain alike, treats mud, stone or gold alike, likes and dislikes alike, is a brave person.'

"At another place, he says this-

'...'

‘The world will remember your infamy forever. For an honourable person, infamy is more painful than death.’

“Once, he teaches anasakta karma like this-

‘…’

‘Get ready for the war presuming that pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat are one and the same. Then, sin will not attach to you.’

“Then he entices him with victory –

‘…’

‘So Arjuna. Get up. Earn fame. Conquer the enemies and enjoy the bountiful kingdom.”

“Now you tell me. If pleasure, pain, victory, defeat, fame and infamy are all equal, why should god entice one with victory and fame?”

I kept mum. Uncle said, “Arey! I ask you this thing. God says –

‘…’

‘God pervades in every heart and because of his maya he makes people act like puppets.’

“If this was true, where was the need to create so much commotion? He could have straightway hurled the disc. The matter would have been settled. What was his wish before Arjuna’s? Why did he say, ‘Do as you wish?’ If that was his intention, he should have stood by his word. Instead, why did he say this? –

‘…’

‘Leave all dharma to me and surrender to me. You will be rid of all sins.’

“Arey! These are the words of pandas and missionaries. Does it behove a god to talk like this? If this is what he finally meant to say, where was the need for seven hundred slokas? In one sloka he could have simply said this –

‘…’

‘O! Arjuna I command you to wage the war.’”

“Uncle, to the extent I know the Gita speaks of nishkarsha, nishkama karma, action without any expectations.”

“Arey! That’s what I can’t understand. How can a work which is wished and done be nishkama? Whatever is done and whoever it is, it’s done with some expectation. Right? The desire to renounce all desires also is a desire, isn’t it? Nishkama karma is a contradiction in terms.”

"Uncle, who am I to question your logic? But a renunciate will have no desire, would he?"

Uncle smiled a little and said, "Child, I haven't come across a single *jeevanmukta*, one who has attained liberation from the present life, until now. If I found one, I would have beaten him with a stick and would have measured his equanimity. Arey! These are all good for nothing words."

I asked solemnly, "Do you mean to say that God preached the Gita only in order to drive Arjuna to fight the war?"

Uncle laughed loudly. He put a pinch of nut powder in the mouth and said, "Arey! In which world are you living? These are all the creation of the poets. The poet needs some subject to demonstrate his poetic skills. One wrote 'Ramagita' with Rama as the protagonist; another 'Sivagita' with Siva and yet another 'Gopigita' with gopikas. Likewise, someone wrote Bhagavadgita to demonstrate his knowledge in the backdrop of the Kurukshetra battle. Answer this: Who had the time to say, or hear a discourse of eighteen chapters in the backdrop of such a mighty battle? Was the large army doing pranayama in trataka pose during that period? Were Sanjaya's eyes fitted with television? The poet needed some excuse to display his knowledge of Sankhya yoga or Vedanta. That is manifested in the Gita."

"Is it your view that the Gita is of no use?"

Uncle smiled and said, "Why not? It helps promotion of family planning. That's the use."

"In what way?"

"Listen to this message of the Gita –

'...'

'You have the authority only to perform your duty. Never on the result.'

"This embodies the mantra of prevention of birth."

I was utterly surprised and said, "How, uncle?"

"Just go on doing your work. Don't expect a reward. Is that not the message? Here the meaning of reward has to be construed as 'children'. How can I be more explicit with you? After all, I'm your uncle."

"Uncle! Every word of yours is laced with humour. The Gita preaches action without expectation of any reward, doesn't it?"

"Yes, son. If this precept is implemented, there can never be a revolution in the country. What use is a ball of jaggery to the oxen of the oil mill? If this knowledge is

internalised by **the** labourers, why would there be a strike in the factories? But right now the maxim of the Gita is followed in the reverse.

'...'

'You have a right only on the fruit; none on the action.'

"To obstruct this nishkarsha bhoga argument, the country needs karma as also its result at the same time to take the country forward. Such gita would be produced not in the Kurukshetra but in the krishikshetra. Because of that Gita Kuru dynasty came to an end. Because of this gita, another kuru (work ethic) mantra will rise. Then only our national song 'sujalam, safalam, sasyasyamalam' would have any meaning.

"The future generations will ask this –

'...'

'In the pious land of Bharat, what was the occupation of our ancestors?'"

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Chapter 4
ROLE MODELS

Uncle saw the book in my hand and said, “You seem to go somewhere with a fat book.”

I said, “It’s *Adarsa Charitavali*.”

Uncle smiled and said, “If anyone follows these days the ideal persons mentioned in that book, he’ll surely end up in a lunatic asylum.”

“Why do you say so, Uncle? Look at Harischandra, the king who was truthful, and munificent. It’s said that ‘Harischandra would not forsake the truth even if the sun, or the moon or the world changed the course’. Wasn’t he great?”

Uncle said with a smile, “O! What a truth! What a truth? If you donated your land to me in your dream, would I prepare the gift deeds by the morning or what? If I donated a young girl in my dream to someone, would I take him as my son-in-law?”

“The story demonstrates the virtue of being truthful,” I said.

“Exactly! That’s the starting point of foolishness! In the dreams, people have a vision of many senseless and meaningless things. If one believes them to be true and follows up, what would be the result? But this oddity is a part of our people. We attach greater importance to the dreams than the reality. It’s on this foundation that the building of Vedanta rests. For us, the whole universe is like a dream. Everything is a mirage. Furthermore, we take the state of deathly silence to be a greater ideal than the state of being awake. While the kettledrum of awakening rolls on in the other countries, we take refuge in this mantra-

‘…’

‘Salutation to the goddess, who is awake in all the living creatures which are in stupor! Salutations! Salutations!’”

“But Uncle, right from the ancient times, we have had this philosophical attitude, didn’t we?”

Uncle was sarcastic. “True. That’s why we treat the day as night and the night as day –

‘…’

‘When it’s night for everyone, it’s the waking time for the inspired soul. When all the creatures are wide awake, then it’s night for the enlightened sage.’

"When the world is asleep, we would be awake and when everyone is asleep we would be awake. I don't know which bird is our inspiration!"

"Uncle, your sarcasm is scathing even though apparently you said it casually."

"I'm not misstating anything. Even the birds of this country are philosophers. Parrot, Jatayu, Garutmanatha, crow are our preceptors. And, about the owl, less said the better. If there was no specialty in the owl, why is the special appearance of the owl titled *'Oulokya darshan'*?"

"Supremely knowledgeable enlightened preceptors and seers like Janaka also were born in this country, weren't they?" I asked.

"Arey! Such enlightenment only has finished us off, hasn't it? The philosophy of Janaka, the king of Mithila, was this –

'…'

'I lose nothing even if Mithila is burnt and reduced to ashes.'

"If all the countrymen follow this ideal, what would be the fate of this country?"

"Uncle, their ideal was to be detached like a lotus leaf on water."

"The simile is good. No doubt about that. But try to be like that just for one day. Be detached and I will go and promptly take possession of your house and all your belongings."

"Uncle, Janaka was beyond all bodily attachments. For him, the breasts of a beautiful woman too were like a clod of the earth."

Uncle smiled and said, "If that were so, there was an indescribable joy in being detached of bodily pleasures. Tell me this. If he was so much detached, Ravana and Rama should have been alike for him, shouldn't they? Then, where was the need for all that ruckus of bow yagna? And, if perchance Ravana had broken the bow?"

"Leave it alone, Uncle. Take the case of Yagnavalkya. He was such an enlightened person, wasn't he?"

"Yes, so enlightened that he needed two wives. Maitreyi for the soul and Katyayani for the body," said uncle, giggling.

"But his scholarly debate with Gargi was of a high order, wasn't it?"

"It was absolutely a debate at the level of children. When Gargi asked him one question after another rendering him clueless, he angrily said, 'If you continue with such questions, your head will be severed and fall to the ground.'"

"But he renounced everything, didn't he?"

"So great at sacrificing that he got all the cows herded home before the ritual was complete, being worried that someone else might drive them away."

"The Brahmins here are so ascetic?"

"Yes, so ascetic that anger is always perched on their nose. Bhigu kicked Vishnu with his foot. Parasurama chopped his mother's head with an axe!"

"What of Maharshi Vasishata and Viswamitra?"

"Both have connection with prostitutes. One came out of Oorvasi's womb, the other impregnated Menaka. The *apsarasa,* the celestial beauties, knew the secrets of the sages very well."

"Devarshi Narada was such great devout…"

"Yes. That's why Mohini stoked the flames of lust in him and made him prance around her like a monkey. Actually, the beautiful women made the sages run around them. With one sidelong glance, in the matter of just a moment, they could reduce their penance to nothing."

"Prahlada and Vibhishana were such men of piety."

"One got his father killed; the other, his brother. Pray save the country from such ideal people."

"Bhishma was such an epitome of ethics."

"That's why in the full royal court, when Draupadi was being disrobed, he kept absolutely mum."

"Drona was such a great man…"

"That's why selfishly he got the thumb of his disciple Ekalavya chopped off. A student of today would have twirled the thumb from a distance at him and said '*tata*' to him.'

"Aruni was so devoted to his guru."

"Yes, when he was sent by his guru to go and fill the breach in the field, he lay supine in the breach. He demonstrated unadulterated stupidity. Students like him would light up dry leaves and carry on with their studies when the oil in the lamp has been exhausted. "

I was distressed. "So, Uncle, is there no merit at all in these stories?"

"Why not? Those days the gurus were smart and the disciples, dimwits. The disciples were sent to graze the cows. They were made to collect firewood. Every story has a message. Someone would have stolen a mango. In order to make him feel abashed, the story of Sankhalikhita is told who was cursed a great deal for

committing a small mistake. A king might take back a cow gifted earlier to a Brahmin. To pre-empt this, the story of Emperor Nriga has been created. Nriga had gifted thousands of cows. That bounty did not count. But a cow which he had been gifted away strayed and returned to the herd. For that reason, he had to endure the life of a chameleon for thousands of years. If the descendants of Nriga were sensible, they would not utter donation of a cow even by mistake."

"Who can argue with you, uncle? But look at the great kings who ruled this land. It's after king Bharatha that this country is known. His father, Dushyantha, was a jewel of the race, wasn't he?"

"Sakuntala, who was brought up by a sage, lost her virginity because of Dushyantha. Afterwards, he refused even to recognise her. You call such debauch and coward a jewel? It's more apt to call him a curse of the race. In fact, that is the meaning of the word '*dushyantha*'. Arey! They were so lustful, craving for sexual pleasure, vying with each other. King Yayathi was old and his organs were worthless. Yet, his carnal desires were not satiated and so he borrowed his son's youth and enjoyed himself. The like of such unbridled lust is not known in the history of any other country."

"Uncle, why don't you see the positive side? This country gave birth to Sibi and Dadheechi who were renowned for their generosity."

"I agree. Sibi cut his flesh and gave it away and Dadheechi, his spine. So, tomorrow if you cut your nose and give it away, should I look up to you as a role model?"

"If you are so derisive, what can I say, uncle? But Look at Aswatthama, Bali, Vyasa, Hanuman, Vibhishana, Kripacharya and Parasurama are said to be immortal."

'…'

Uncle smiled and said, "Do you know the true meaning of this *sloka*? A Brahmin in penury, a foolish king, a scholar who flatters, a devout who is purblind, an ingrate brother, an arrogant teacher and an irascible Brahmin – these seven persons always exist on this land. Take it that this is the misfortune of our country."

"We have many ideal persons, one greater than the other. Yet, you'd like none of them. Look, many virtuous women such as Savitri were born in this country."

"None of these women listened to their fathers. They married as per their wish opposing their parents. You call them ideals, do you? If my daughter too does the

same, how would I feel? That's why I wouldn't allow my daughters to read the story of Sati Savitri. This '*Charitavali*' shall not get into my home."

I was hurt. "It's due to these ideals that our country is known as a pious land, isn't it? Unparalleled ideals have been established here."

"True. We have no parallels. Moradhwaja's mania for honouring the guest was so overwhelming that he sawed his son, cooked his meat and served the guest! Was this idealism or madness? For some, it was a mania for donations and for some others it was truthfulness. A woman by name Sumathi was so crazy of her wifely duty that she carried her leper husband on her head and took him to the prostitute's house to satisfy his lust. Do we take her as our ideal? I say, she and her ilk were mentally sick."

"Kings and Brahmins in our country followed high principles, didn't they?'

"Hey, son! The king had strength but no brain. The Brahmin had brain but no strength. For each word if one picked up a weapon, the other took out a scripture. If the bow of one was strung, curse was forever ready on the tongue of the other. If the Brahmins were angry, they cited the scriptures. If the kings went crazy, they would take vows. There's no count of lives lost in this country due to such vows."

"One should not break a promise even if it would cause death. Was this not the tradition with our people?" I said.

"That's what I call stupidity. The principles are meant for us; not the other way round. They have to be our instruments and not our goals. When they come in the way of fulfilling our goals, what use are they to us? It's good to cut the ear and throw the gold ear ring into the fire, is it? Because your childhood shoes don't fit you now, you won't cut your feet to fit the shoes, would you?"

"Our principles are not like the shoes which can be changed, are they?"

"Why not? Once upon a time, a woman who threw herself on the pyre of the dead husband was worshipped as a goddess. Now if anyone tries to do that, police will arrest and take her away."

"But theoreticians don't go about keeping the provisions of law in mind, do they?"

"Let them not. But shouldn't they at least trust their own sense? There's no theory which can be followed blindly. Assume a teacher orders his disciple to go in the easterly direction. Then the disciple walks straight and doesn't move an inch this side or that and hits a palm tree. Do you call such stubbornness an ideal or stupidity? How many heads of kings have been chopped off due to such obstinacy? How many

queens have been reduced to ashes? How many royal palaces have been pulled down? Our history is replete with instances of such foolishness."

"Uncle, why did they write these minor stories, stories within the story, in our mythology?"

"Arey! They were written to deceive the kings; to be served by the disciples and the sudras and to keep women under their thumb. The writers of these stories push the moral ideal to the extreme limits. If the idea is to demonstrate the prowess of a chaste woman, fire would leap out from the hem of her sari. A woman would bring her husband back alive, snatching him from the hands of Lord Yama. Another woman would stop the progress of time by stopping the Sun's chariot. Our people are absolutely incapable of saying anything without exaggeration. What's the result of all this? The pictures of our ideals have become cartoons instead of photos."

"Do you mean to say these ideals in our mythology have no value?"

"They have, like the value that can be assigned to the rusted sheath and sword in the museum. They are meant for the exhibition; not for use."

"Uncle, why is there so much exaggeration in describing these characters?"

"Arey, my child! Exaggeration is in our blood. Right from the Vedic times, whoever we praise, we raise him sky high and call him the sun or the moon. Whoever we blame, we crush him into the abyss. Like it's said, 'The hillock on which Hanuman rests his foot sinks into the abyss in a moment.' We don't know the golden mean.

"You look at this yourself. Our literature is full of exaggeration. When the heroine has large eyes, then it's said that they are stretched covering the entire space between the ears. If the breasts were full, they are like the gold pitchers. Arey! There's a limit to everything but none in our case.

"Just because we have a mouth to babble, can we say that gallnut is as long as ten arms?'

"Whatever occurred to them, they wrote. One would lift a mountain. Another would drink the water of the ocean and dry it up. No less. One would hold the earth between his teeth. On would swallow the sun. If one was a chaturanana, another would be a panchanana, the third would be a shadanana and yet another would be a dasanana! If one had three shoulders, another had four and yet another had one thousand. If one fought the war for one thousand years, another would do penance for five thousand years. A third would have intercourse for ten thousand years! In the typhoon of hyperbole, we have buried the truth."

“Do you mean to say that these are all part of fiction?”

Uncle said sarcastically, “So long as there are great scholars who write these in our country, who will have the courage to say that? If our great Hanuman arrives, that is enough. He’ll wrap up the soldiers of all countries around his tail. One sage Agastya will do to empty water together with the ships of all the oceans. A Varaha incarnation is enough to lift and throw the earth like a football. One Vamana would do to cover the moon with one foot. Let the people of other countries invent wonderful machines and take care of them! We of course would have our work done through the incarnations. One incarnation would suffice to solve our problems in a jiffy. A mere shout is enough for a mountain of food grains to appear before us. With one arrow, the ocean of milk and curd would become a wave of joy.”

“Uncle, you have made the ajasra stream of exaggeration flow!”

“Arey! Who do you think I am? Of which race? It’s in the blood. There are other countries to take science forward. There must be someone to bear the burden of the fantasy,” uncle said smilingly. “Okay, son. Take your album and go. I don’t need these ideal persons. I’m a realist.”

***

Chapter 5
SATYANARAYANA PUJA

Sipping lassi, Vikatakavi Uncle was in an ecstatic state.

I went over to him and said, “Uncle, today there’s Satyanarayana Puja at my home.”

“Really? I hope in the name of *satyam*, truth, puja of *asatyam*, untruth, is not going on, son,” Uncle asked.

I plugged my ears and said, “Ramarama! Uncle, you shouldn’t be making fun of god like this.”

“You’re the one who is ridiculing god,” Uncle said, smilingly.

“How?”

“Look at the puja method. How sixteen kinds of puja are being performed?

‘….’

“First the god is invited and offered a seat. ‘Please come here. Come and take your seat.’ Then water to wash the feet and face. Offer light refreshments. Water to bathe. New clothes. Offer flowers, garland, sandal, incense sticks, camphor and other aromatic things. Then, many kinds of *naivedyam*, offering of food.

‘ ‘

“Then the god is addressed like this - ‘Tuck in many kinds of sweets such as *pindi vantalau*, *payasam* cooked with sugar and pure ghee’.

“The lucky ones who would tuck them in, of course, are different. Yet, ludicrously even betel leaf and areca nut are kept in front of the idol.

‘…’

‘I am offering pan, spiced with camphor and cloves. Accept it with love and make my happiness grow.’

“At the end, they stand up, give *arathi*, lighted camphor worship, and clang the bell metal announcing people to disperse.

‘…’

‘Now the puja is over. Now feel satisfied. Now you may go home. Forgive if a mistake has occurred.’

“Arey! What is this farce? And what are the objects of such worship? Worn down tiny little black stones of the size of gulabjam or blue berries!”

"*Narmadeswaram* and *Salagram* are the symbols of Siva and Vishnu, aren't they?"

Uncle said smiling, "Are! Narmadeswara means '…' means 'god of fun and frolic'. Thanks to puja of Salagram, in this big village, this entertainment has been arranged for so many people. Besides, there's distribution of *laddu* of huge quantity. This farce is cheaper than a cinema. There's no need to purchase a ticket. And at the end, they give *prasad* too. This is more solemn than the games children play because elders and even the old people participate in the puja. Further, it doesn't occur to anyone that something funny is going on here. Girls play dressing up a doll as a bride. You play god making him a guest as though Salagram is your daughter's father-in-law."

"What is that about, Uncle?"

"Observe carefully. You do the same things in the puja that are done when the bridegroom arrives with his father. Offer a seat first. Then hand over water. Then follow bath, refreshments, garland of flowers, sandal, and food with the sweetmeats, pan, and cloths and at the end urging forgiveness for mistakes, if any. There's just one difference. The Salagram is bathed with a little quantity of water. The food offered remains intact. In the name of cloth, even a cotton strand would do. In one hour, the bell is rung off bidding people goodbye. 'Please go home.' If the groom's father is told 'you may go now' what would happen? It would be disastrous, wouldn't it be? But god is not the groom's father. *Samdhee* means 'a person of equal intelligence'. If the god has the same intelligence as the householder, then god alone should protect us."

"But along with the puja, a story also is told, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes, if the puja is a play, the story, a novel. The spectators are given a treat to the eye and the ear."

"Uncle, there must be some profound meaning in the story?"

Uncles picked up Satyanarayana Vratha story and said, "Then listen to the gist of this story which the priest will recite tonight after blowing the conch. Once upon a time, in Naimisa forest, a conference was held for the benefit of the world, the purpose of which was to divine an easy route to remove the misery and pain of mankind with least expense and time and labour.

'…'

"Suta, who presided over the conference said, 'Once in Vaikunta, Narada too asked Vishnu the same question -

'...'

"That means, 'People on the earth are suffering a lot. Please tell an easy way to help them, Swamy'.

"Then the most munificent god revealed this -

'...'

"That means, people would be rid of all their sufferings if they perform Satyanarayan puja traditionally'.

"That's not all. The god also told the method of the puja and the account of prasad as well!

'...'

"That means 'Prepare Prasad with bananas, ghee, milk, sugar, wheat flour. If wheat flour is not available, rice flour will do. And if there's no sugar, use jaggery.' God is kind. So kind that he didn't forget to tell the substitutes if wheat flour and sugar are not available.

"After spending a life time, Bhagawan Buddha found *ashtanga marga*, the eight fold path, as a relief for the sufferings. That must be reckoned as a path strewn with difficulties compared to Satyanarayana Puja which solved the problem in a trice and showed *mishtannna* path which is so easy-

'...'

'Everyone has to take prasad with love. There must be programmes of music and dance. Food must be served to the friends and relatives along with the Brahmins.'

'...'

'If it's done like this, man would be rid of all troubles and would attain salvation.'

"There cannot be an easier method than this," Uncle said.

I said, "But..."

Uncle said, "Four proofs have been given in reply this 'but'- to silence the critics. These strengthen the belief in the mind of the devotees. And they would be inspired to perform the puja."

Uncle leafed through the pages of the story book and said, “The first story is about a poor Brahmin of Kasi. God is kindness personified. He saw the Brahmin begging and said,-

‘…’

“Satyananarayana, who is another form of Vishnu, would fulfil all desires. So you worship him. ‘Perform his vrata, which is par excellence.’

“That day itself, the Brahmin got lot of money. He performed the puja. When he found puja yielding profit, he began to perform puja every month.

‘…’

‘He was rid of all sorrow, sins and possessed every single means of pleasure. Finally, he attained salvation too which was difficult even for the yogis to attain.’”

Finding that I was looking at Uncle in disbelief, he resumed. “In Kasi, there’s no count of Brahmin beggars. Why then did the god bestow his kind benevolence on only that Brahmin? And what did he advise him? Not to revolt but to perform his puja. Let that pass. How come there are hordes of beggars there despite knowing very well the path to get rid of penury? Why can’t those miserable people have the sense to know that they should borrow if need be and collect ghee, sugar, and other ingredients for performing puja once? They would surely have mouthful of sugar, ghee everyday thereafter, wouldn’t they?”

“Uncle, are these stories all of the same kind?”

“Of course, they are. I call this propaganda. Listen to this. A woodcutter performed puja. Then the wood he sold fetched twice as much!

‘…’

“Later on because of the puja, he acquired wealth, son, heaven, et al. Likewise, Angadhwaja, a king also performed the puja. He also got everything.

‘…’

‘Because of the power of the puja, he acquired wealth and a son. He enjoyed all the pleasures of this world and left for Satya Lok.’

“Hey! What’s all this but publicity? It’s as though a broker or an insurance agent is talking.”

“They all sound like fairly tales meant for the kids, don’t they?” I said.

“Indeed. There’s one story which is captivating though. That story to an extent reveals the nature of your Satyanarayana Swamy,” Uncle said.

“Is it the story of Leelavathi-Kalavathi?” I asked.

"Yes. You might have heard it."

I piped up. "I haven't. In any case, it'll be great fun to hear it from you."

"Then, listen to it. A merchant performed puja. Then,

'...'

"His wife conceived. Due to Satyanarayana's grace, a beautiful girl was born. She was named 'Kalavathi'. The merchant vowed that he would again perform puja at her marriage time. But unfortunately, the poor fellow forgot about it. The god was angry and cursed him –

'...'

"You play games with me, do you? You vowed to perform the puja and didn't. Look at what I can do. Let untold sufferings be yours," he cursed.

"Listen to the next part of the story. The merchant went with his son-in-law over to another kingdom for business. There was a theft in the palace of that king, Chandraketu. As ordained by god, the thieves left the booty at where the merchant and his son-in-law were lodged. The soldiers recovered the booty and arrested the two. The king relieved them of all their money and sent them to the prison. They both sobbed and pleaded, but,

'...'

'No one cared to hear them due to the maya of Satyanarayana.'"

"Such a thing would cast aspersion on the character and nature of God, won't it, Uncle?"

"How does it matter if the god is besmirched so long as the bags of the disciples are filled with *prasad*? What else is needed? If the god is not depicted like this, would people be afraid of god? And if they are not scared, why would they offer puja ingredients? Don't take Satyanarayana for an ordinary god. He's no less than the police inspector. Cry or laugh, but you must pay up what is due to him. Otherwise, he'll foist a case on you, commit you to the jail and inflict pain until death."

"How can there be affection for such a god?"

"Hey, where there's no fear, there can't be affection. Ordinary people perform puja more out of fear than affection. If they are convinced that nothing will come or go because of Salagram, then they will take it straight to the Salagram River and throw it away. Things in the world don't work on account of kindness and affection. That's why Satyanarayana is converted into an embodiment of revenge."

"How did the merchant and his son-in-law come out of it all?" I asked.

"That part is even more interesting. The mother and daughter who stayed at home came to know that their husbands were languishing in the prison. One night, Kalawathi returned home late. 'Where were you until so late in night?' asked the mother-in-law. Kalawathi replied that she was delayed by Satyanarayana puja. The moment she heard this, she remembered her vow. Without a moment's delay, she performed the puja and prayed to god -

'…'

'Forgive the crime of my husband and my son-in-law.'

"The god was satisfied and appeared in king Chandraketu's dream and said –

'…'

'Return the money to the merchants and let them go. Else, I'll destroy your kingdom, your wife and children and the rest.'

"Hey, how could he be a god? He could pass off for an evil Saniswara though. He would think nothing short of complete ruination of anyone who crossed his path. What would poor Chandraketu do? He paid the merchants two times their money and said, 'O! Revered souls, now do me the favour of returning to your homes. Let me live in peace.'

'…'

"Uncle, what was the mistake of Chandraketu that god should be so angry with him?"

"He must have suddenly remembered that Kalavati's youth was withering away and that her husband must have been imprisoned by the evil king. It didn't occur to him that all this happened due to his maya. Hey, son! How much time does it take the mighty and the chameleon to change colours?"

Uncle smiled and continued. "There was this Ugradeva Sastry. One day he rushed to his wife to throttle her just because there was a slight delay in serving food to him. But when she came opposite him with hot, hot puris, he was immensely pleased and adorned her neck with a necklace. Next day, there was excess salt in *pappu*. He instantly snatched the necklace from her. To me, this god is no better than Ugradeva Sastry. 'Display anger for one moment and joy, the next.' In anger he got the merchant arrested and got him released being pleased with his wife Kalawati. Not like a god but like a dictatorial feudal lord."

Uncle took a little snuff and resumed. "The story has not ended yet. When the merchant got his cargo loaded on the ship and was returning, god appeared before

him in the form of a mendicant and asked him, 'What is there in the ship?' The merchant grew suspicious. He didn't know who he was. Why was he asking about the cargo? He wondered and wanted to get rid of him by saying something.

'...'

'The cargo in the ship is loaded with hay and the like,' he said. God waited for an opportunity like this, didn't he? He added a sentence to what the merchant said. '...' 'May your words come true!' Then what? The entire cargo turned into hay. The merchant was inconsolable. God watched all this, merrily as though saying, 'This is my power. Scoundrel, you wanted to deceive me, didn't you? Now enjoy the punishment.'

"Look at this. Why did he go there in disguise, concealing his true identity? What was this if not deception? And how the merchant not telling the truth to a stranger in self defence can be called deception! Is this what god should do? Is this god's justice? All right. The merchant promised –

'...'

'Be kind to me. From now on I'll worship you to the fullest extent.'

"Then god was pleased and returned the goods to him. This god proved himself to a notch above the sales tax officer."

"So, anyhow he returned home safely, didn't he?" I asked.

"Not so soon! The story is not over yet! When Kalawathi received the news at home, she ran towards the river to meet her husband. In her haste, she forgot to take god's prasad.

'...'

"What else? God again turned a police inspector.

'He was overcome with anger and drowned her husband, his wealth and the goods in the river. Kalawathi swooned and fell down. Her parents began to cry aloud. Then once again god heckled and said, 'O! You have come running to meet your husband, leaving my prasad behind, to insult me, haven't you? Now hear this. Until you go and eat prasad, your husband would stay drowned in the river like this.' What choice did Kalawati have? She ran home, ate prasad, and returned after satisfying the god's whim."

Uncle cut the nuts and said, "Tell me this. Why should god be so envious of a young woman who was stressed out and who went in haste to meet her long lost husband? Such competitive attitude is seen among the villains in cinemas. Why in

god? Actually he should be happy that Kalawati worshipped her husband more than the god. But he turned a competitor. Finally Kalawathi went to Satya Lok where that god is stationed. I don't know how she put up with him there. As for me, I'm terrified to hear the name Satyanarayana."

"Uncle, why are there four stories in Satyanarayana puja where one would have sufficed?"

"It's with a view to force people of all classes to perform the puja that a representative has been taken from each of the four *varnas* - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra. A poor Brahmin became rich. A king got a son. A Vysya got a daughter. A woodcutter got plenty of profit. This is the gist of all these stories. Such things happen routinely day and night all around us, puja or no puja. When Lilawati conceives, what's so special about that incident? What puja has this Abdul Miyan performed that he has a dozen children? And Chowdary's wife hasn't conceived even though she has got the story recited every month. Would monthly menstrual activity cease because of monthly puja? Poor Sharma! He has been blowing the conch all his life. He couldn't even have a proper roof over his house. On the other hand, thanks to black marketing, Varala Setty has built a three-storied house. Why hasn't your Satyanarayana seized all his money as punishment?"

"Do you mean that there is no satyam, truth, in Satyanarayana story?"

"Think for a while. From start to the finish, Satyanarayana appears like one who is greedy, self-centred, and villainous. He has been depicted as worse than a human being. In fact, he has been reduced to the status of a monkey, which often threatens and flicks off the fruit and later returns it merrily. How could devotion and not disgust be generated about such a god?"

I said, "But it has been said that the result of puja would be indeed great, isn't it?"

Uncle replied, "True. '…' (One who performs puja will acquire wealth. He'll win everywhere.) What I ask is very simple. If both the contestants perform puja, who would win? The story says that the desire of the person who performs puja will be fulfilled.

'…'

"Whether the desire of the householder who performs the puja will be fulfilled or not is not known but the priest's desire will be certainly fulfilled forthwith. Because the scholar who wrote this story didn't forget to write this-

'...'

'After hearing this story till the end, everyone must make an offering to the Brahmin.'

"If the Brahmin is not given his due, even Brahma would turn against you."

"Do you mean to say that the story has been created only to fleece the householders of their money and get prasad?"

"What else? 'If you allow your ear to be pierced, you'll get jaggery' is how the children are enticed. Similarly, the householder is enticed. 'Distribution of jaggery and banana mixed in milk will beget a son.' The list is long. Then what? Innocent people will clamour to do this, much like the children falling for a fake watch sold for ten paise. How can anyone be saved from falling prey to fake things? Even if they are told the truth, would they care? Likewise, what can be said of people who fill a pot with milk and mix banana and jaggery in that and expect a son or a daughter or heaven in return? The country is known for herd mentality. That's why in this country adulterers grow wealthy while the adherents of the truth live in utter poverty."

"Uncle, what is the solution?"

Uncle said in a tone of finality, "If possible, worship the real Satyadeva. Wherever untruth, injustice, deceit, gambling, corruption, black marketing, conspiracy to defeat the truth exist, go there and blow the conch of truth. Awaken the people. Lead the society towards the truth. That's the true satyavratha. That's worship of satya. If that kind of worship begins, then heaven will descend on the earth. Then nothing would be unavailable.

'...'

(When the truth is worshipped, there's nothing in the world which cannot be achieved.)

***

Chapter 6
ASTROLOGY

That day the astrologer was studying the almanac. Then Uncle suddenly came there. When the astrologer saw him, he was in trepidation and began to pack up the almanac and his other belongings. Uncle accosted him, “What are you studying, my dear astrologer?”

“The newly-wed bride is still at her mother’s place. Looking for the auspicious day for her to come here,” the astrologer said.

“She can come here whenever she wishes. Why do you take so much trouble to fix it?”

“She has to commence her journey on an auspicious day, shouldn’t she?”

“True. She should not commence her journey on a bad day such as when there is a cyclone. Isn’t that all that’s there to it?”

“There isn’t a single good day this month,” the astrologer said.

“Why not? This month has all the thirty days.”

“But the time is moving in the easterly direction, isn’t it?”

“Don’t tell me those devious things. Is time a bull left to roam freely in the village to say that it has gone to graze in the open field in the east? Time always stays where it ought to be.”

“You don’t believe in science. Now the sun travels from the west to the east.”

“So what? What’s the bride’s mistake in that that you don’t permit her to come to her in-law’s home?”

“What do you want me to do? There’s no auspicious time for the next three months.”

“Why?”

“Look. She can’t come here in the month of Pushya.”

“Why?”

“This month is not auspicious.”

“What sin has Pushya month committed?”

“How can anyone argue with you? In Magha and Falguna months time reverses its path. In Chaitra, moon will not be beneficial.”

"God himself is against these people. That's why they are asking you to fix a good day. O! Master, what do you mean when you say time is reversing in Falguna and the moon is not favourably disposed of in Chaitra?"

"Then, Bhadra month (astrologically not auspicious) will arrive," said the astrologer.

"You are the most inauspicious Bhadra, I say. Ask me instead. I'll fix today as the auspicious day," Uncle said.

"How's that possible? Today is Monday. And it is prescribed that you have to give up travelling in the easterly direction on Monday," the astrologer said.

"Why? Are there any nails in the path or what?" Uncle said.

"You speak like an atheist. 'Travel to the east is proscribed on Saturday and Monday.'"

"Why? Tell me then how would the train from Delhi to Howrah run today? In fact, the whole earth itself rotates from the west to the east. How?"

"Wise people travel when the celestial constellation is beneficial to them," the astrologer said.

"If travelling in the direction of strength causes rain of *laddu*s, then I'll travel everyday in that direction. I travel everyday in every direction. Where there is a proscription, nails didn't hurt me. Nor did it rain flowers when there was no problem with the day."

"Do you mean to say the directional problem is all humbug?"

"The problem that you are talking about is nothing but the thorn in your eye."

"What about the problem with the particular days? Is that also humbug?"

"Yes. Why is that there no such problem in other countries? We are the worst fools, aren't we?"

"If you ignore science, what can be said? But take a look at 'Muhurta Chintamani'..."

Uncle snapped at him. "Not Muhurta Chintamani' but 'Dhurta Chintamani'. Self serving people like you have trapped everyone in the great vicious circle of auspicious moments. Muhurtam for every damn thing. Time for the king to perform abhishekam, for the army, horses and the elephants to march, soldier to wear the armoury, merchant for purchase and sale, money-lender to grant loans, washerman to wash cloths, dancer to start the dance. What is this but sheer humbug? The farmers have been caught in the web of muhurtam for everything - for ploughing,

seeding, transplantation and harvest. You have a greater grip on the women's hair. When should they tie the hair into a bun? When should the fire be lit? When should they bathe? When should the children be breast-fed?"

Uncle observed the expression of surprise on my face and said, "I'm not saying this for fun. The astrologers have attained great control over the women's breasts also. Even the child who suckles is not spared by the astrologers. If you don't trust me, listen to this –

'…' (Daivajna Vallabha)

'It is good to breast-feed the child on all days except Chaturthi and Tuesday.'

"Arey! What's this madness? Why should Mangala planet be annoyed and cause harm if a woman gives her breast to her new born child on Tuesday? Why should it have enmity with her breast?"

"Uncle, probably the planets and the stars do have an effect and that's the reason for such discussion on time."

"Arey! Time is the cause of our ruin. Time at home and outside. Time for the field. Birth time. Time for death. Time for marriage. Surely no emperor or king would have had more fuss and pomp than the emperor of time. 'He will destroy if annoyed.' This fear has made cowards of people. Muhurth for marriage, muhurth for nuptials and muhurth for house warming. This is not all. There's muhurth for conception too. What is this if not extreme foolishness?"

"Uncle! I'm sure you are saying this for fun. How could anyone consult the almanac for conceiving?"

"Arey! You don't seem to believe this! You are innocent. What do you know? Listen to this relating to the time for conceiving –

'…'

'There's no permit for conception on *shasti, ashtamai*, full moon day, no moon day, *chavithi* and *chaturdasi*. There's permit for this activity only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.' Answer this: Will the moon be eclipsed or will the sky break up if the bride and bride groom have intercourse on the pleasant full moon night? If the couple have sex on Sunday, will the horses of the Sun's chariot be frightened or the wheel be broken? Why should the astrologers, like the self existent beings, like the flies in the ointment, poke those noses in everything as if it is their personal matter? Why do they interfere like the scorpions in the affair of the couple? Why should they come like this, uninvited?"

“Uncle, don’t you have faith in astrology?”

“Arey! If astrology was true, I should have died two thousand times by now.”

“How, Uncle?”

“This is what is said in astrology-

‘Trouble is round the corner if oil is applied on Sunday. Monday it’ll enure brightness; Tuesday, death; Wednesday, money; Thursday, penury and Saturday, comfort. In these, only the astrologer should tell what the relationship between the cause and the effect is. For the last fifty years I have been applying oil everyday. In these years, there must have been more than two thousand five hundred Tuesdays. Yet I’m alive. Now tell me. Do you want me to believe in astrology?”

“Uncle! Only an astrologer can give a reply to this.”

“What would he say? He’ll fix you tightly in his net. Look at the hubbub created in Ruthuprakaran, where at one place, it is said –

‘…’

‘If a woman menstruates on Sunday, she will become a widow.’

“At another place, it is said –

‘…’

‘If if a woman menstruates on Panchami, she would never be a widow.’

“Now I’ll ask the astrologer this. What will happen to the woman who menstruates on panchami Sunday?”

The astrologer remained mum. Then Uncle continued. “At one place it is said –

‘…’

‘If a woman attains puberty in Magha month, she would give birth to children.’

“At another place, it’s like this-

‘…’

‘If a woman attains puberty in Krithika star, she would be childless.’

“Now ask the astrologer if she would give birth to an impotent person if she attains puberty in Magha month and Krithika star?”

Noticing that the astrologer was in no position to reply, Uncle said, “See this finny thing. It’s said at one place-

‘…’

‘If puberty is attained in Dhanu rasi, she will be woman of virtue.’

“At another place –

‘…’

'If puberty is attained on Saturday, she will be a prostitute.'

"Now you decide this yourself. What would happen if puberty is attained on Saturday in Dhanu rasi?

"Arey! What all should I have to recount? So much of deceit, fraud, trickery, cunningness. If I describe everything, it'll be a big *purana*. Yet, people here go on holding the astrologer's tail."

As Uncle was speaking, Buddhinath Choudhary came running and said, "O! Astrologer master! Just now a boy is born in my home. That's why I've come rushing to you. Please cast his horoscope and advise me."

"How long ago was the child born?" asked the astrologer.

"Ten minutes ago," Badrinath replied.

The astrologer consulted the almanac and started. He shouted, "My goodness!"

Uncle asked, "What's matter? Have you been bitten by a hornet or what?"

The astrologer put his hand on his head and said, "No. If it were that I wouldn't have been bothered. But I see wholesale destruction."

Buddhinath Choudhry's face turned pale. He shivered and said, "Please tell me at once, master. What's there in the horoscope?"

"What's there in the horoscope to say? Mud and dust. His birth star is *moola* first *padam* and in *ganda yoga*. He'll be the cause of his father's death."

Buddhinath Choudhry felt as though he was struck by thunder. His eyes brimmed with tears.

The astrologer gravely said, "This child has been born to cause trouble to you. There are only two options. Cast away the child. Or else, send the child and his mother to his grandfather's house. You can't see his face for eight years. And from now on you have to donate cows, gold, perform *navagraha puja*, et al."

Uncle couldn't take it any more. "Whoever has written this is a big scoundrel, a conceited fellow and a cheat. You are the evil planets in reality. In the name of stars, you make good of your own star. Through your needless conspiracy, why do you torture the poor man?"

"Does it mean that you don't believe in horoscope?" the astrologer asked.

"As far as I know, there's one benefit out of the horoscope. Your child will get ear rings. In my view horoscope is nothing but trickery. Thousands of children would have been born at this time. Will their destiny and life be the same because of that?

Twins will be born at the same time. One will survive and the other won't. The horoscope of both must be the same. Then why are the results are so contrasting?"

The astrologer was somewhat confused and said, "Bhrigu and Parasara and others have dilated so much on the horoscopes. Do you imply that that was all humbug (mithya, a mirage)?"

"For thousands of years, you have been in this cunning business, peddling these names, aren't you? Whatever occurs to you, make a sloka and attribute it to Parasara. O! Man. I have also read books on astrology. Only rogues could have written those things. Putting blinkers on the eyes of the householders, they have said obscene things about their women too."

The astrologer started, "Where? For example?"

"Not one or two. Many. Look at this –

'...'

"Looking at the horoscope of the house owner, they (astrologers) would doubtless know that the man's wife would be stout, like a sack of puffed rice. That's not all. By making calculations of the planets in the horoscope, they would find out the shape of their breasts too.

'If Kuja is ruling, her breasts would be large and robust.'"

I was surprised. Uncle noticed this and said, "Don't gape at me like this. This is nothing. Listen further –

'...'

'The wife of the person who has this yoga doubtless would become a prostitute or would satisfy the desire of many persons.'"

"Uncle! Married life would be ruined completely because of such words, wouldn't it?" I asked.

Uncle said, "The persons who make the sloka have no worry. Hear this –

'...'

'If the child's horoscope has this yoga, the child without doubt is a bastard.'"

I said, "This sloka can cut the throat of a woman."

"Not just hers. There's a sloka which would slit the throat of her brother-in-law's as well. Look at this –

'...'

'If the horoscope has this yoga, the son would be born out of the semen of the brother-in-law.'

"The smell of the semen would reveal it to the astrologer! Tell me what is this if not plunder, pillage, conspiracy and goondaism? Such ruffians in this country are called the ocean of learning of astrology."

"You have mentioned so many things. Are they all in the treatises on astrology?" I asked.

"What do you mean? I've quoted from the texts. The astrologer is right in front of you. Ask him if all these are there in the texts or not? And what text is it? 'Parasara horasarah'."

The astrologer scratched his head and said, "True. These are there in the text. 'Parasara horasarah' is a standard text on astrology. But why do you call it untrue?"

"Not only untrue but obscene. The kind of abuses written in that can't be heard anywhere except in brothel houses. Look at this –

'If a person has the influence of this planet, he would covet other women. His wife will become a prostitute. His mother will be a bitch.'

"Such abuses about wife and mother will be heard only in cultureless families. Is this a language of the scholars?"

"Uncle! I never knew that the texts on astrology would contain such words."

"You don't know because you never read astrology. You would know if you read 'Brihajjatakam' and 'Parasara horasarah'."

The astrologer couldn't contain himself any more. "Where's the evidence to say that all this is false?" he asked, as if he was throwing a challenge.

Uncle replied: "I'm the evidence. My horoscope predicted that I'd be a king. Forget kingdom. I don't even have four acres of land. Instead of *rajayoga*, everyday I'm forced to practise *hatayoga*. Then about *jaraja* yoga. Apply some logic. Does anyone get into adultery after consulting the almanac? Thereafter, would the child come of the womb after checking the *lagna*? Forget about others. You can't detect even your own child's jaraja yoga. Keeping in view people like you, it has been said –

'…'

'You would be watching the time of union of the moon with Visakha but wouldn't know of your wife's activities, who is rollicking in the embrace of many people.'

"That being the case, how could you catch that someone is a bastard?"

The astrologer was angry. "What you have said is abusive. Do you mean to say that the wife of an astrologer would be a prostitute?"

Uncle smiled and said, “The feminine gender for *ganaka* (astrologer) is *ganika* (prostitute). Isn’t that so? Besides, ganaka also more or less does the same work as ganika. Look at how well it has been explained –

‘…’

“Ganaka and ganika are equal. The Creator intended both to earn money by enticing people through their five parts of the body. Ganaka opens the almanac and shows to the people. Ganika opens and shows her five parts.’”

The astrologer was as good as dead. Yet, he proudly said, “Whatever has been mentioned in the science of astrology is proven and true. Bhrigu and Parasara had vision of the past, present and future.”

“Do you have faith in astrology?” asked Uncle.

“Of course,” replied the astrologer.

“Then let me look at your horoscope.”

The astrologer hesitantly picked up the horoscope and handed it over to Uncle.

Uncle examined the horoscope and said, “Do you want me to tell you the result? You’ll not run away, would you?”

“Why would I run away?” said the astrologer.

“Then hear this. Parasara says like this –

‘If Sukra enters planet Mangala or is seen in conjunction with Mangala, the person will have the pleasure of *bhaga* kiss.’

“Then look at where Sukra is in your chart. Tell me if the result applies to you or not. Do you want me to explain the meaning of this in crude language to everyone?”

The moment he heard this, the astrologer packed his books and left the place in a huff.

Uncle kept calling him from behind. “O! Master, o astrologer! Take at least some nut powder and go.”

But why would the astrologer return?

***

Chapter 7
THE GODS

Uncle saw the pitchers in our hands and asked, “Where are you off to so early in the morning?”

“Today is Sivaratri. We’re off to anoint Siva with water,” I said.

“In the month of Falguna, when such cool breeze is blowing in the morning, you have set out to pour water on Siva’s head, have you? What harm did he cause to you that you have decided to attack him like this?”

“Uncle, you are always out to make fun.”

“Not at all. Siva is himself Siitavirya. (One who has the quality of causing coolness.) Where is the need to pour water upon such person? Instead, it is better you pour water in the cruse on this mint plant.”

“Uncle, don’t you have any devotion towards the gods?”

“Come and sit here for a while. Anyway your group is bent on doing it. You lose nothing by being a little late, do you? Come again. What was your question about the gods?”

“Well, I asked if you had any devotion towards the gods.”

“If the puranas are taken as the base, how can anyone be inclined to have devotion towards the gods? I know the character of each. Do you want me to reveal the secrets of each of those? Tell me. I haven’t found a single god who is not lustful, deceitful, wasteful and wicked. The rakshasas, demons, used to win because of their strength; the gods through their deceit. In my view, the gods are inferior to the rakshasas.”

“Uncle, you speak about everything in a strange way, don’t you?”

“It’s time you read about the war between the gods and the asuras. When the rakshasas invaded the gods, gods used to run away, shouting ‘trahi, trahi’ (save us, save us). From Brahma to Vishnu. Then, Siva. When he too failed, they ran to Durga seeking her protection. Mahishasura, observing their cowardice, chided them –

‘…’

‘I’ll kill the gods, who keep a woman in their front as a shield like *sata*s and wish to conquer me, and pile them up on the ground.’

"But they were shameless. They would make Mother Durga stand up in the front and they would hide behind her sari."

"Was Devi stronger than the gods?"

"Yes, without a doubt. If Vishnu had four shoulders, Durga had eight. If Siva travelled by the bull, Durga rode a lion. Siva would be like a corpse with no energy. In contrast, Durga would shake the dirt off her body and even that would cause commotion among the gods. That's why whenever they encountered defeat, they would plead with Devi.

'...'

'I worship Durga whose protection gods sought when Siva fell off the chariot in the great war with Tripurasura.'

"This's certainly something to be ashamed of," I said.

"Son! If gods had any sense of shame, would they make Vishakanya give poison to the asuras? In the churning of the ocean, would they drink ambrosia and keep poison in front of the asuras? What could be greater injustice than this? They were so selfish that they asked for the spine of sage Dadheechi. Blinded by their selfishness, they didn't even know what they were asking for. That spine became Vajrayudha. Thunderbolts must shower upon them!"

"You seem to think only from one angle and deduce. Just take a look at the great deeds of the gods," I said.

"It's good not even to think of what they did. For the sin that Indra committed, Guatama cursed him, and his body was filled with the vaginas which were seen by everyone in the gods' court.

'...'

"Indra was such a rascal that whenever someone did penance, his throne would shake. If yagna-yagas were performed anywhere, rain would pour."

"If that be so, how did he become a man of valour?"

"He was a man of such valour that Meghnath bundled him up with ropes! Son, how would a person in Amaravathi immersed in pleasures of the flesh in the company of celestial damsels stand up in a battle? That's why Indra is roundly abused in Puranas –

'...'

'Despite being the husband of Sachidevi, who was like Lakshmi herself, he coveted other women.'

"He wanted the company of different girls day after day.

'...'

'His duty was to release semen day and night.'

"The sun and the moon shine so brightly with their valour, don't they?" I said.

"Neither was blemishless. Kunthi and Usha knew how pious Sun was. He was so glorious that Ketu would devour him regularly! That is why he is *Uchista*, defiled. That's the reason that in astrology he's called a sinful planet. When that's so, how could there be radiance in Gayatri mantra? It's pointless to recite *'dhio yonah prachoadayath'* (inspire our mind of nobility) repeatedly. We have understood the meaning of 'Savitha' (sun) as 'prasavita', as one who does the work quickly. That means, there will be neither birth nor death on the earth without him. Nothing can be created. Take the moon. Because of his deed, the soot that was stuck to his face has not yet been washed off. He did not even bother to mull that she was his guru's wife. '...' The stigma would not be obliterated until there is the sun and the moon. That's why he is afflicted with the waning disease (tuberculosis). Actually, he should have been afflicted with an incurable form of leprosy."

"Uncle, gods are 'ajulu', unborn and 'avinasulu', indestructible, are they not?"

"True. 'Aja' means goat. Gods indeed are like the goats. 'Avi' means ram. Gods are really 'avinasas', slayers of the rams. Nobody ever sacrifices a horse, or an elephant or a tiger. It's the goat always. Gods too accept only the weak creatures in sacrifice."

"Uncle, leave the small, small gods alone. Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswara are the mighty ones, are they not?'

"If that's what you think, hear this about them also. Brahma is merely a lump of mud. What if there are four faces? Never did he accomplish a single task. Whenever gods approached him for help, he said, 'Go to Vishnu.' That means he expressed his inability. He sat cross-legged like the Buddha. There's no one to match him in dullness."

"Uncle, how can you talk like that about the god who is the source of all creation?" I said.

"How did he become the source? He sprang up the naval of Vishnu. Then what can be said of the creation? He was born in Satya Yug but his misdeed has no parallel even in Kali Yug. He ran after his daughter despite being the *karta* of all the four Vedas. By name, he is 'ajudu' (one who has no birth) but look at what he did. That's the reason 'aja' has acquired the meaning 'goat'. A goat munches everything, leaving

nothing. Because of his goat-like nature, he was declared unfit for worship. If after worship of all gods, some *akshatalu* remain, only they are sprinkled in his name."

"Uncle, Vishnu was the tallest of them all, wasn't he?"

"Huh, Vishnu? There's no one who was more deceitful than him. At one place, he assumed a beautiful form and enticed women. At another place, he assumed the form of Mohini and made men swoon over him. He killed Madhu and Kaitabha, Sunda and Sundopa through deception. He played such tricks on Jalandhara's wife that he elevated trickery to another level. There's none who could match him in deception."

"But why don't you consider the mighty things he did in various avataras?"

Uncle, slicing the nut, said, "Hey, all his deeds were of the same kind. They were full of deception, cunningness and selfishness. Look at what trick he resorted to in the case of Emperor Bali. Poor man, he got sacrificed! I think that it's due to the donation that he made that the phrase 'balidan' must have come into vogue. '…'. At one place, he caused a rift between a father and a son and at another place, rift between brothers. At yet another place, he made the husband separate from his wife. Look at what all he did. Enmity with Hiranyakasyapa and friendship with Prahlada; killing Ravana and enthroning Vibheeshana and romancing Radha and not even saying 'hello' to her husband!"

"Uncle, look at how in the nick of time, he saved Draupadi from humiliation."

Uncle smiled and said, "O, my son! I think he heaped before Draupadi all the saris of Gopikas that he had stolen ashore the river Yamuna. So long as it served his self interest he roamed about the Brindavan. Afterwards, he proceeded to Dwaraka. What happened to Radha thereafter didn't bother him. Why should it? Poor thing! He didn't even write a letter to her. What happened to Yasoda who fed him with butter? Not a word. Remember, he was no one's fool. He was utterly selfish. To fulfil his selfish ends, he assumed the form of a fish, tortoise, pig and what not? Will there be anyone else who could assume different forms like him? This minute, he assumes the form of Narasimaha and the next minute, the Buddha. Breaks the bow as Rama; hacks with the axe as Parasurama; forsake his wife at home and leave for the forest as the Buddha; and stays at home and banishes his wife to the forest as Rama. He's engaged in fancies like this. In one avatara he chops his mother's head off. In another, he throws his uncle down and finishes him off. We don't know what he will be up to in Kalki avatara!"

"Uncle, all these are manifestations of the play of the god, are they not?"

"True. God's play! He has no guardian above him, is there? In a way, he's still a minor. That's the reason for the absence of moustache or beard for the idols of Rama and Krishna!"

"Uncle, this is a good point indeed. Vishnu is always youthful. And, he's the one who rules the universe."

"That's why, son, the world is like this! He derives pleasure in being lazy. That's why he's always at his in-law's place, supine on the milky ocean! If the gods entreated strongly, he would ride Garutmanta, finish the work with Sudarsana disc and return to indulge in looking at Lakshmi's face. One who stays at his in-law's place day and night would be indolent, won't he? Hey, can a person stay at his in-law's place like him while being burdened with the rule of the universe on his head? But who can chide him? Whenever accosted by a sage like Bhrigu, he would learn a little bit. That's why he's scared of the Brahmins. But if he had devotion for the Brahmins, why should the goddess of poverty sit on my head?"

"That means, among the Trinity, only Siva remains," I said.

Uncle took a pinch of nut powder, put it in his mouth and said, "Then you must hear about Siva too. Naturally, he is bereft of thinking. He's the kind who eats *jilledu, ummetta* and is in a state of intoxication. He has neither caste nor *gotra* nor discrimination between touchable and untouchable things. Demons and ogres are his friends. He wraps himself around with hides, wears a necklace of bones and roams about the burial grounds, like a hatayogi. That's why no one eats his prasad."

Finding that I was looking at his face intently, Uncle resumed, "In a way, Siva is an atheist. He debunked all traditions and age old practices. He didn't sport a pigtail. He didn't offer food to the Brahmins. Can anyone think of touring riding the back of an ox? Would anyone adorn his neck with snakes? Once, when he felt like it, he consumed poison too. Such a strange person has not been born again till now."

"Siva is said to be unaffected by external things, isn't he?"

"Not really. He killed his father-in-law because he didn't invite him for the yagna. He made his father-in-law bite dust like this and put his daughter on his head and became ardha nareeswara. It's apt to say that husbands of Kali Yug have adopted him as their role model and put their wives on their heads!"

"But, he was so gentle, an *ashutoshudu*, was he not? It wouldn't take long for him to be pleased."

"True. If anyone offered a *bilva* leaf to him and say 'Sambho Sankara', he'd instantly say, 'Make a wish'. No thinking. The consequence of this was Bhasmasura, who wanted to place his hand on Siva's head to test the boon. In a way, all demons acquired strength and haughtiness from him. Is there any god other than him who is in stupor like him? That's why he's called 'Bham bola' (the innocent). Son, I tried my best to get something out of this Bholanath but have failed till now. How do we trust someone who is forever in a state of intoxication?"

"Then Uncle, who among the gods is the best?"

"How can I say? Even the gods couldn't settle this. If Siva says Vishnu is the best, Vishnu says Siva is the best. Rama worshipped Siva. Siva chanted Rama's name. Sita worshipped Gowri. Sailaja prayed to Sita. Parvathi prayed to Siva. Siva sang paeans of Durga. There was so much of confusion that the gods couldn't decide on the hierarchy. Otherwise, can Vinayaka be worshipped during Siva's wedding? The ways of the gods can indeed be strange."

"Uncle, could such humility and obedience be seen unless he was so great?"

"*Deavaanaam priyah* (a fool) only can say like this. Arey, bickering among the gods was so intense that the like of it was not seen anywhere else. The number of battles that took place among them couldn't have occurred anywhere else. First each said the other was great. Then if there was a dispute, they would engage in a fight. Read puranas if you are interested in finding out the disputes between Indra and Krishna, Krishna and Siva and Siva and Vinayaka. After all the disputes, the same refrain: 'You are worthy of worship.' We must put our palms together in prayer for these gods."

"If all gods are like that, how is the creation being carried on?"

Uncle cut the nuts into tiny pieces and said, "Truth to tell, the creator is just one god. That is Manmatha. It's because of him that creation occurs. Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara all were defeated by him. When that was the fate of the elders, what could be said of Vinayaka?"

"Uncle, among the gods Vinayaka is worshipped first in order to forestall all obstacles, isn't he?"

"Yes, that's why he's called Vighneswara. But his life was full of obstacles. The moment Sani glanced at him, his head was chopped off and he turned elephant-headed. In the battle with Parasurama, he broke his tooth when the axe landed on him and he became one-toothed. Tell me, how the one who couldn't avert his own

obstacles prevent others' obstacles? That's why however much we pray Ganapathy we wouldn't be free of our troubles."

"In that case, do you say Manmatha was more powerful than Vinayaka?"

"He was more powerful than even Vinayaka's dad. One who can defeat Manmatha is yet to be born. Can anyone question the prowess of Manmatha so long as the activity of creation goes on? The body which comprises of five elements is the bounty of his five arrows. The day when that god puts the arrows in the quiver and packs off that day would spell the doom for the world. Cessation of creation is known as the doom, isn't it?"

"Then, what is the origin of the story 'Kama dahanam'?"

"The true meaning of the phrase 'Kama dahanam' is 'kamena dahanam', that is, 'burning with desire'. Eighty-four lakh vaginas burn craving for sex. Look at how many names Manmatha has. They all reveal this fact. Since kamana (lust) is the strongest of all desires, he's called Kamadeva. Since he intoxicates (mattu), he's Madana. Since he churns the mind (madhinchu), he's Manmatha. Since he is unseen (adrusya), he's Ananga. Since he causes delightful pain (madhura noppi), he's Rathipathi. Since in parting he causes death (maranam in separation), he's Mara."

"Do you mean to say that Siva didn't conquer him?"

"How could Siva win? Manmadha defeated Siva. That's why –

'...'

'By the mere touch of Durga's vagina, Siva turned lustful and swooned.'

"Brahma Vairtava Purana vividly describes how badly Manmatha tortured Siva during the intercourse -

'...'

'The semen fell on the earth. Skandha was born out of that.'

"If Siva indeed defeated Manmadha, how could Vinayaka and Kartikeya be born? Everyone says Siva reduced Manmadha to ashes. I don't agree. I say that Manmadha turned Siva into ashes. That's why when he was separated from his wife, he smeared himself with ash. Do you know what is 'bhasma'?

'...' 'The semen which was burnt with the sharp rays of Siva is called bhasma.

"Bhasma is nothing but Siva's semen. Now tell me. Who was stronger, Siva or Manmatha?"

I kept staring at Uncle. He resumed, "The Veda too mentions that Manmatha is more important than all others.

'...'

'For any yagna, kamana, that is desire is important. We worship the gods and ancestors with kamana.'

"Bhavishya Purana goes even farther.

'...'

'Brahma took his daughter; Vishnu, his mother and Siva, his sister and attained excellence.'"

"If that be so, why are there no temples for Manmatha when they are there for other gods?"

Uncle smiled and said, "You're truly innocent, son! That god (Mnmadha) is in every temple, from the temple of the body to the temple of gods. In some temples such as Konark and Khajuraho, he is seen in great splendour. In other temples, he's in a form which is not explicit. And, what about the phallus on which you are planning to pour water? What does it symbolise? Get into the temple and observe Siva linga and the base. The secret will be evident to you."

"Uncle, do you ridicule gods too?"

"Not at all. Read this –

'...'

'The base is Parvathi and the linga, Siva Himself. If these are worshipped, it amounts to worship of both.'

"Listen to this as well-

'...'

'The union of Siva and Sakti is symbolically represented as 'lingam'.

'...'

'Wherever there is phallus, there will be vagina. Wherever there is vagina, there is Siva. Sivalingam is produced by the lustre of both.'

"The Saivas worship one organ, the Saktas, the other organ. Some worship both. What you wish to describe this, as Dwaita or Adwaita or Visishtadwaita, I don't care."

"Uncle, you tease the brain while indulging in banter. Don't you have faith in the gods?"

"Why not? 'God' means a person who is divinely luminous. 'God' has been created after the kings who dazzle in colourful robes. 'Easwara' means the master. 'Lakshmipathi' means a rich person. 'Narayana' means a person who sleeps in Jalamahal. 'Garudavahana' means a person who travels in a fast moving vehicle.

‘Prajapathi’ means a leader of the people. ‘Hara’ means a person who collects taxes. ‘Chaturbhuja’ means a person, the strength of whose arms is spread in all four directions. ‘Panchamukha’ means a person who steals food of five people. These are all called gods. They who are rich and influential are the gods.”

Uncle picked up some snuff and said, “Look. In the olden days, there were small ‘ganas’, armies. That’s how the fiction started with Ganesa, who was the head of a local unit. Even those days, the leaders were like elephants. Common people, much the same way as rats, suffered under their weight. That’s why they were called the riders of the rats. Then, looking at the kings, who lived a life of pomp and luxury in the royal palaces, Indra was created. Looking at the emperor, the idea that ‘there is just one Brahma, no other’ took birth. If the gods were symbolic of the feudal lordship, Parabrahma was the symbol of imperialism. But now is the time of socialism. And, in democracy, we are the real gods!”

***

Chapter 8.
WAVES OF THE VEDAS

It was Holi festival that day. Uncle had two rounds of *bhang* and was getting ready for the third. He saw me and said, “Come on, son. Come. Now saffron bhang is getting ready. You also have some.”

“No, Uncle. I don’t take bhang.”

Uncle was quite tipsy. He swayed and said, “Arey! What makes you give up the Vedic tradition?”

“How does consuming bhang qualify as Vedic tradition, Uncle?”

“Read the Veda. Then you would know how our ancestors drank. There’s no count of the hymns of eulogy on *somsras* in the Vedas. At some places, it quite simply dominates everything else.”

“What is the evidence to show that bhang then was known as somras?”

“Not one or two but many evidences. Look, it was pounded in kalvam. It was ground on a stone. It was filtered with cloth. It was mixed with water or milk. Many spices were mixed with it. It was made in three colours, green, white and yellow. That means regular bhang, milk bhang and saffron bhang.”

“But some say that somaras means knowledge or the rays of the moon. Is that not so?”

“Whoever says that, their mind must have been filled with bhang. For some, *aswam* in Veda hymns means the grain of rice; *gow* means rice and *ghrutaysa dhara* means the voice of knowledge. But I think logically. If somras was knowledge, how was it pounded with the pestle? If it were the rays of the moon, how was it ground on stone?”

“Is there no doubt that *somam* is bhang, Uncle?”

“Not in the least. In Rigveda, in many chapters, there is a continuous description of this. At one place, there is the description of filtration and at another, mixing. The sages and gods derived immense pleasure in drinking this. Indra, the king of gods, used to consume so much that he would get tipsy. You know how he drank? His beard and moustache would be drenched in the drink. He would shake off the juice flowing down the beard.

'...'

'Drink and drink until falling on the ground...'"

"If somras was bhang, how could the rishis preach such solemn things?"

"Arey! Only when they were filled with it could they think of solemn things? That's how those visionaries could express an opinion on the most secret matters. The man's *adi granth* (the first book) contains a lot on *adi ras* (sex). There's nothing comparable to the Vedic description of the coitus in the world literature."

"What? Coitus in the Vedas!" I said.

"Arey! It's none too subtle. In the stream of somaras, *sringara* (romance) ras swelled up in thousand streams. That's why I say the students and the bachelors should not study the Vedas."

"Uncle! I am astounded by what you say. How could there be discussion of sexual intercourse in the Vedas?" I said.

Pounding bhang in kalvam, Uncle smilingly said, "Then listen to this. 'The somalatha leaves were being pounded like this. The pestle was pounding.' The *ruchakar* uses simile now –

'...'

"Uncle! What does it mean?"

"It says when a woman has parted her thighs and opens the mouth of her vagina, then...You're my brother's son. How can I explain it to you more explicitly than this?"

"Uncle, after hearing your words, there is no need for me to say anything else."

Uncle tied a cloth around the mouth of the cruse and placed on top the ball of bhang. Then to filter it, he poured water over it and began to move the fingers in that. Then he smiled and said, "A sage in Gayatri hymn says about moving the fingers like this –

'...'

"What's the meaning of this, Uncle?"

"It says the lass who is amorous is signalling her paramour with her fingers like this."

"Was there adultery in the Vedic times too?"

"Not only had it existed but the sages derived great pleasure out of it."

Uncle began to pour bhang in the kalash and he said smilingly, "Look! A sage who was excited watching ras being poured into kalash like this said –

'...'

'The sprayer filled with the fluid spurts and sprays into the pitcher, into the women…like what…'"

"They were all rishis, persons who did penance. How could they think of employing such similes?" I asked.

"The simile gave so much pleasure to the rishis that they used it on many occasions. Hear this mantra-

'…'

'That means, the way this juice flows is like the paramour's … flows into women.'"

"My god! Description of the paramour in the Veda?" I said.

"Arey! The importance attached to the paramour can be gauzed from this in Gayatri *chandassu*.

'…'

"That means, O! Somadeva, like a woman who accepts her paramour, I accept you.

"There is mention of the paramour in the Veda one thousand times. I guess those days, paramours were assigned greater importance than the husbands."

"These slokas are proof that the women in the Vedic times had great deal of freedom," I said.

"Is there any doubt about that? The Vedic women were quite independent. At one place, a young girl would invite her paramour and at another a married woman would worship her paramour. How would the paramour make love his lover? What was the kind of satisfaction derived by the young woman in the company of a young paramour? There are descriptions of this kind too in the Vedas."

"If that were so, there must have been illegitimate children also in the Vedic society."

"Not one or two but many. Vasishta was born out of Oorvasis's womb. Dirghathama's pregnant mother had intercourse with Brihaspathi and gave birth to a child of mixed caste. Purukutsu's wife begot Trasadasyu thanks to Saparshi. How many women had delivered secretly? What all do you want me to tell? If I recount all the occasions of adultery, it would be the fifth Veda. That's why I don't keep the commentaries on the Vedas at home lest women would go astray. That's probably also the reason why women are not allowed to study the Vedas.

'…'

'Women and the Sudras shall not study the Vedas.'"

"Uncle, whatever you said amazes me," I said. "I have been under the impression that the drum beats of bachelorhood rent the air those days."

Uncle smiled and said, "Now you know what kinds of drums were played on, don't you? Just see how the rishis lost their consciousness, being drunk and tipsy on account of Somaras-

'...'

"How is it possible to say anything so sleazy? Uncle, what's the exact meaning of the sloka?"

"It means –'the organ desires to enter ... covered with hair. O! Somadeva! You begin to ooze.' Tell me this. Who but a drunkard would speak like this?"

I was distressed. "I always thought that the rishi and rishinis were *tatwadarsulu*, philosophers," I said.

Uncle sipped saffron bhang and said, "Even the prostitutes would be abashed when they hear the mantras that rishinis wrote. Listen to what Ghosha, a spinster rishini said-

'...'

'I invite you to this yagna with the same warmth as a widow would invite her brother-in-law into her bedroom.'"

"My goodness! Such shameless words from an unmarried girl?" I said.

"You're petrified with this! See how Angira rishi's daughter Saswathadevi turned ecstatic looking at the organ of a young man.

'...'

'Seeing the strong, long one dangling between the two thighs, Saswathi said, "Aha! You have such a beautiful one which is an open invitation for intercourse.""

I was dumb struck. "This is the limit, Uncle. Unless one is fully drunk and senseless, such words would not escape the lips."

"Arey! They were all drunkards, weren't they? That's why even the prostitutes were not their equals in lewd talk. Look at what Surya spinster said -

'...'

"I don't understand this," I said.

"Well, 'uruu' means both thighs; 'visram' means open; 'sefe' means the organ; 'praharama' means to hit. Put them together and try to understand. If you don't still follow, ask any Vedic pundit."

"I didn't know that the Vedas contained such obscenity, Uncle," I said.

"To know about what obscenity means I suggest you read the tenth mandala of Rigveda where Indra and Indrani indulge in sexual intercourse ecstatically. Indrani slaps her thighs and says-

'...'

"That means, 'Pound me like a horned bull bellows and mounts.' Kashmira kokkokasastra is no match to the description of intercourse thereafter."

I interjected and said, "Uncle" but I found him unstoppable. He was excited and said, "Your head will reel if you read the description of Lomasa's sexual frenzy who in her youthful lust went berserk. She removed all her embellishments and told king Swanaya-

'...'

"That means, 'You come close to me and hold me tightly. Look at how like the hair of a ram, how big...big...!'

"Can there be anything more vulgar than this that can be uttered by a woman? Then, the Uddama sex game that goes on is something which I cannot tell you and which for you is not worth hearing. He was so full of Lomasa that he choked and gave her a certificate of Rathimallatha (top notch wrestler in sex)-

'...'

"That means, his body is covered by the body of this young woman completely and she is engaged in the act of sexual intercourse ecstatically. "

I couldn't believe it. "Uncle, I suppose you are not telling this under the influence of bhang, are you?"

"I'm not drunk. Those who vividly describe sex between the siblings, between father and daughter were intoxicated. You will be shocked to hear about Brahma's intercourse with his daughter. '...' (Father impregnated his daughter.) I can't utter the kind of obscene words that are there in it even when I am under the influence of bhang."

"Uncle, what then is the difference between the Vedas and Vama marga?"

"In so far as I'm concerned, I think the Vedas are the source of Vama marga. From where else would have the followers of Vama marga got it? Look at what is written in 'Kali tantra'-

'...'

'Liquor, meat, fish, vigina and sex have been the five instruments of liberation all though the ages.'

“Jnana Sakala Tantra says this –

‘…’

‘Whoever gets relieved of worldly shame or the ties of the society would become Sadasiva or Jeevanmukt.’

“Liquor is assigned the same importance in Vama marga as Somaras in the Vedas. In Matrika Tantra, it is said –

“That means, O! Goddess! Without drinking liquor, spiritual knowledge cannot accrue. That’s why Brahmins must drink liquor.

“Kamakhya Tantra even goes further –

‘…’

‘Whoever doesn’t drink liquor after taking diksha of Kalika or Tharini, the water that he offers is equal to the dog’s urine.’

“Of the five means of liberation, the greatest importance has been given to sex. ‘Kulavarna Tantra’ says this –

‘…’

‘O! Goddess, the fifth one is as dear to me as my life. Chandi mantra shall not be recited in any case without having sexual intercourse.'

“Then, consider how distinctive is the method of japa as described in ‘Utpatthi mantra’ –

‘…’

“That means, ‘those who follow the caste practices, and who worship caste have to get fixed in a sexual pose and do japa in that pose only’. This they called as Kulachara or Kulapuja. ‘Sarasarvaswa’ contains this –

‘…’

“That means, whoever does japa one thousand times gazing at a naked woman, he will become experts in all the fields. He will have known all Vedas.

“Further, Kulasarwaswa says this-

‘…’

“That means, ‘Whoever does japa ten thousand times gazing at the menstruating vagina, his speech of word and verse would have the desired effect.’”

“Uncle, followers of Vama marga also practised caste and religion, didn’t they?”

“No, son.

'...' (Whoever gets to Bhairavai Kshetra (where puja is performed in panchamkara) they all will become chaste Brahmins and the women assembled there would be reckoned as women of virtue (kula stree).)

"In Utpatthi mantra, it is said –

'...'

"That means, 'O! Parameswari, the woman of the caste has to be fucked unmattamga. Particularly, a young woman who is kamonmatturalu, vilasavathi.

"Gupta Sadhana Tantra mentions-

'...'

"That means, 'a gypsy woman, kapalika, a prostitute, a washerwoman, a barber woman, a Brahmin woman, a Sudra woman, a cowherd woman, a gardener woman – women of all these castes are fit for the secret practices.'

"In Rudrayamala Tantra, it is said-

'...'

"That means, Chandalini is equal to Kasi, Charmakarini to Prayaga, Kanjari woman to Ayodhya, a washerwoman to Mathura.' Intercourse with these women would earn the same merit as pilgrimage to these places.

"Yoga is explained like this in 'Gnanarnava Tantra'-

'...'

'That means, O! Parvathy! Yog is union of the Nature (woman) and man (semen). There's no doubt about it.'

"Puja secret is told like this-

'...'

"That means, the orgasmic sound 'sii, sii' is the mantra. The words uttered at that time are the true mantras and slokas. Massage is tarpana. Flow of semen is visarjana.'

"Kularnava Tantra says this-

'...'

"That means, O!Parvathy! Siva ought not to be worshipped without liquor and meat. O, nitambini, I (Shiva) shall not be satisfied without bhaga lingamruta Prasad."

"This seems to have no limits, Uncle. Even Charvaka hadn't gone this far."

"Arey, they were grandfathers of Charvaka. Agastya told Lopamudra that a human being has to indulge sexual intercourse happily all his life. (Rigveda 1/179/2). Charvaka too said the same but he has been labelled as an atheist. Agastya was a

sage. Arey, whatever I say intoxicated that I am of bhang are dismissed as funny but whatever they said consuming samaras have become the Vedas. Son, say this. Have my words crossed all limits? Tell me."

"Uncle, on the festival of Holi, everything is all right."

"True. Obscene words uttered on Holi day are exempt from blame. Do you know the reason for this? 'Dharmasindhu' says this-

'…'

'The wicked ogre Holika will get satiated only when you go around it uttering extremely obscene words such as bhagam, vagina, penis and the like.'

"In 'Shyama-Chandrika' it is said –

'…'

'The organ is the bliss. Vagina is the ultimate thing. Praising the penis is most desirable. Praising the vagina is most pleasurable.'

"That probably is the source of the tradition of abusing on the day of Holi. I guess it's on the day of Holi that some made this sloka and sang it-

'…'

"In Kali Yug, everyone becomes a philosopher much like everybody turns a child during the festival of Holi."

"Some commentators ascribe spiritual meanings to the obscene words, don't they?" I asked.

"Just listen to this mantra –

'…'

"That means –'Your organ must grow so big that it should be like a strong horse's or donkey's…!' So, here the donkey too is spiritual, isn't not? Arey, the words they said in the name of gardabhesti (a yagna performed as a penance for committing the sin of breaking the vow of celibacy) and aswamedham (horse sacrifice) are so crude that even Charvaka called them fakes, deceivers and ogres-

'…'

"Those Veda writers who said the wife of the person who performs horse sacrifice has to receive the horse's organ are fakes, deceivers and ogres."

Just then our aunt arrived there with kheer.

Uncle was joyous. He said, "Take it. It is Holika's Prasad. The sweets are the lifeline of our Vedic culture, aren't they? Since the Vedic times, we have been lavishing praise on sweetmeats. Just hear this-

‘…’

‘Let all the produce of the Nature be filled with honey. Let water also be sweet. The sky too must be filled with sweets.’

“They wanted the entire world to be immersed in sweet-

‘…’

‘Let the wind be sweet. Let the rivers be sweet. The trees, the nights and the mornings be sweet! The dust on the earth be sweet! The sky which is like our father be sweet! Let the Sun be sweet! Let our cows be sweet.’

“Arey, in which other country would you find such interest in the sweets? Here even after death too, the ancestors are satiated saying ‘om, madhu, madhu, madhu’. Aha ha! Now let us follow the adage that we should conclude everything with sweets.”

Seeing me accepting Prasad, Uncle began to recite Vedic hymns tunefully-

‘…’

‘Let honey be at the tip of my tongue. Let honey be at the base of my tongue. Let the words that escape my mouth be sweet. Let the food that enters my mouth be sweet. Let all my activities be full of sweet. Let me be as sweet-natured as honey.’”

Uncle said, “You know its meaning, don’t you? Let there be sweet all though the life on the tongue; eating sweets, let us talk sweetly; get sweets and distribute sweets. Let all that we see be sweet. This, my son, is the sweetest of all hymns in the Vedas.”

While saying this, Uncle’s eyes began to close in drowsiness.

Aunt saw that and said, “Leave him to me now, son. I’ll take care,” and she led Vikatakavi Uncle inside.

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Chapter 9.
THE PRIEST

That day the family priest of my in-laws was accosted by our wisecrack Uncle and was mauled badly. What happened was this. The priest came to our village on being invited to perform the last rites. When everyone was talking about Chowdary's death, the Brahmin said in a mollifying tone, "What has to happen will happen and no one can prevent it. His was untimely death but '…' which means no one would die before the due time and no one would live after his time is up."

Just then the temple priest came there to give charanamrith. Accepting the holy water, the priest recited the sloka-

'…'

'I drink Vishnu charanamrith which prevents untimely death and which eradicates all diseases.'

Uncle came there suddenly. The moment he came, he questioned the priest, "Just now you said nobody would die before the death is due and now why do you talk of preventing untimely death?"

The Brahmin was taken aback at this sudden question. Nothing occurred in answer to this.

"You said whatever ought to happen will happen and no one can prevent it from happening, didn't you?" Uncle persisted.

"Yes," said the Brahmin.

'…'

"What is not destined to happen will not happen. What is destined to happen will happen, come what may. The thing which has to be destroyed would be lost even when it is securely held in the palm," he said.

"All right. Assume that death awaits you tomorrow. Would you survive if you made an extraordinary effort?" asked Uncle.

"Impossible. Even king Parikshit who took so many precautions did not survive. How could I?

'…'

" 'What is written on the forehead cannot be changed by anyone'."

"If a big doctor is called?" Uncle asked.

"Even if the grandfather of Dhanvanthari arrives, it's useless."

"But if the time is not up, then?"

"Then, he will become all right just like that."

"Then there is no need for any medication, is there?" Uncle said.

The Brahmin was now confused. He said, "Not that way. Effort is still required.

'...'

"Wealth covets a lion-like man who works hard. Only the lowly one would say that luck alone begets everything. Forget about luck and try to achieve things through hard work. Failure after trying is no wrong."

"With this sloka, luck just vanishes. The saying that whatever is destined to happen will happen also becomes meaningless," said Uncle.

The Brahmin said, "No. Who can prevent what is bound to happen?

'...'

"The mind changes in accordance with what is bound to happen."

"That means the mind has no independence; that it is in the grip of luck. If that is so what meaning can be ascribed to man's accomplishment?" Uncle asked.

The Brahmin had no answer.

Uncle said, "If what is destined to happen, happens it's pointless to preach. Isn't it?"

"How is that?" asked the Brahmin.

"The words 'speak the truth and follow righteousness' would have meaning only if the doer has the freedom to say. Isn't it? But the meaning of the sloka you recited is that we are not free and that we act at the bidding of others. Then what is the meaning of destiny and proscriptions? Can anyone control the speed of the arrow released from the bow? Can anyone dictate the waves of the ocean to stop from rising? If everyone is carried away by the stream of destiny, if no one has any authority on the life stream, what is the sense in saying 'do this and don't do this'? Then the words, 'do' and 'don't do' have to be removed from the vocabulary. The difference between merit and sin would vanish and the dharma sastra also would become meaningless. Sir, what do you say? Do you agree with this?"

The Brahmin again had nothing to say.

"Master, I hate confusion. Strike off the sloka which says what is destined to happen will happen or throw the entire dharma sastra in the River Ganga. It is not possible to ride on both the horses. Ride on one."

The Brahmin would not forsake either. He was clueless.

Realising that the Brahmin was in a pickle, I changed the subject and said, "The last rites are being conducted on a grand scale, aren't they?"

The Brahmin got an opportunity to breathe now. He exhaled and said, "There is no doubt about it. Chowdary's wife is generous. It has been a long time since such a lavish feast had been arranged for the Brahmins. I'm still belching Badshaw sweets," and pressing his palm over his tummy he began reciting 'ajiirna nasana mantra'.

'…'

" 'Let Agastya who ate up Atapini and Vatapi and who drank up the ocean be pleased.'

"Seven kinds of sweets were made. Silver vessels were donated in the ritual for the dead. Silk beds were given. Gold coins were donated. And shawls would be given to the Brahmins in the end. Chowdary was regal in nature. He must have been born in some royal family. He was extremely generous. The rite is being conducted in a befitting manner. He must be quite pleased with all this watching from the heaven. May his soul rest in peace."

Uncle who heard all this quietly until now couldn't hold back any more and said, "Sir, you have uttered three things in one breath which are irreconcilable."

"What are they?"

"What do you believe in? That Chowdary is in heaven? Or he is in the soul for which the rites are performed? Or he has been reborn? It's not possible for all the three to happen at one time."

The Brahmin belched again.

Uncle resumed. "Think for yourself. If Chowdary is born again, he must be suckling still. Then what is the point in giving pinda made of rice? If he is in the heaven why should he forsake nectar and deign to come here to drink the water given here? If his soul is still around, what is the meaning in gifting the cot, umbrella and chappals? Do the souls wear chappals and walk?"

Watching the Brahmin who was faltering, Uncle said, "Sir, this is the great magic that you have woven. So long as Brahmins like you catch fish like Chowdary's wife, you will keep belching badshaw. But your tricks can't continue for long. For centuries, many have been calling the bluff-

'…' (Charvaka)

'If the dead man could be propitiated with the last rites, the lamp should be lighted automatically when oil is poured.'

'…' (Charvaka)

'If what is donated here reaches the ancestors, why the food served on the ground floor cannot reach you when you are seated on the first floor?'

'…' (Charvaka)

'If food can be given by reciting mantras, why can't your wife not serve food to you at your home when you are away in another state? Why should you needlessly carry food while you travel?'

'…' (Charvaka)

'If he is really in some other world, why can't he come to console the grieving wife and relatives?'

"You have not replied to Charvaka's challenges till date."

The Brahmin said, "Even after the death, the ancestors are given water. That's the specialty of this country."

"That's what I don't understand. Can the dead drink water? You take water in the palm and give away to the ancestors, asking them to be satisfied with this water-

'…'

"That means, I offer this water to my father, so and so Sarma. May he be satisfied with this!

"Assuming that the ancestors do drink water, won't they get a little water also in the other world? Is there such acute scarcity of water there? Should they like the chataka bird crave for two drops of water? You read the mantra, squeeze water out of the wet towel and read the following mantra –

'…'

"That means, all those who died issueless in my race may drink water squeezed out of this towel. Is this proper? How would you feel if your son did this when you were alive? Truth to tell, in the name of offering water to the ancestors, the rascals have arranged food for themselves. You rob the householder's cow by making him recite this sloka in the ruse of making him cross the River Vaitarani –

'…'

"That means, to cross the blue Vaitarani at the gate of the hell, I donate this black cow.

“As the householder hangs holding the cow’s tail, you keep drinking the milk. That’s why the people of Lokayata religion say this –

‘…’

“That means, the Brahmins made all these tricks to fill their belly. In reality, rites are not performed for the dead anywhere.

“In other countries, such rites are not done because the Brahmins who make one cross the River Vaitarani are not found there.”

The Brahmin retorted angrily, “You have no faith in the soul. That’s why you speak like an atheist.”

“What’s atma for you?” asked Uncle.

“The one which is beyond the body, the sensory organs, the mind and the intellect is atma. It is pure, unmukta and joyous,” the Brahmin said in an assured tone, as if his explanation can never be rebutted.

“Sir, if atma is by nature joyous, why did you say let god allow Chowdary’s soul rest in peace? Do you mean to say that his soul is down with diarrhoea?”

Belching, the Brahmin recited a sloka –

‘…’

“That means, one must remember Agastya, Kumbhakarna, Sani, Fire and Bhima for digestion.”

Uncle again butted in. “Sir, you ate the food and Bhima is the one who digests.”

The Brahmin was now furious. “You are an atheist. You criticise others. Despite being a Brahmin, you don’t even smear sandal paste,” he said.

Uncle was cool. “Sir, in the feudal era, women who wished to have intercourse used to apply sandal paste on their breasts and the gluttonous Brahmins on their forehead. Do we need these sign boards even now? Would srikhand (yogurt) get stuck in the mouth without srikhand (sandal paste)? Would the food become bhasma merely because ash is applied?”

The Brahmin’s fury knew no bounds. He said, “Listen to what the scriptures say –

‘…’

“That means, food and water not offered to Vishnu are equal to excreta and urine.

“You offer food to the god before you eat, don’t you?”

Uncle said, “Do you mean to say that while eating, keep a morsel aside on the ground for god? I can’t insult god like that. Is he a cat or what to throw a ball of food like that at him?”

"Do you ever pray to Gayatri- Savitri?"

Uncle smiled and said, "You scholars see Gayatri in the form of a girl and Savitri as a young woman. '…' And how does the girl look like? '…' She is red complexioned. She wears a silk sari. She is garlanded, smeared with white pastes and embellished.

"And just see how you pray Savitri –

'…'

"She is young, red complexioned, wearing white cloths, three-eyed… I don't mock at Gayatri-Savitri with such mantras."

The Brahmin snapped angrily, "Manu prescribed this-

'…'

'A Brahmin who does not say his prayers turning his face to the east in the morning and to the west in the evening has to be ostracised from all Brahminical rituals treating him like a Sudra.'

"Do you do sandhya vandanam? Do you recite aghamarshaka suktam? Do you chant the Gayatri mantra 108 times?" the priest asked.

Uncle smiled and said, " 'Aghamarshanam' means cleanser of sins. The Gayatri mantra sharpens the mind. So, the sinners and idiots have to practice all these things."

The Brahmin was infuriated. He said, 'Indirectly you call me a fool. Do you mean to say that all Brahmins are fools?"

Uncle respectfully replied, "I can't say that of all Brahmins. But some do have these seven qualities-

'…'

'Arrogance, avarice, anger, miserliness, being effeminate, blaming others and flattery are the Brahminical qualities.'"

The priest said angrily, "You too are a Brahmin, aren't you?"

"That's why I too have some qualities of a Brahmin."

I said, "Uncle, why are Brahmins so arrogant?"

Picking up a pinch of snuff, Uncle said, "The reason is that in Sanskrit, I is the first person, you the middle person and what remains thereafter is only the lowly. Is it not so? Therefore, in their view all others are lowly."

I said, "Uncle you have put it beautifully."

Uncle said, "Then, listen to another sloka in 'Vikatakavi purana" –

'…'

‘Craving for the sweetmeats, to think of romance always and to possess the skill of giving discourses to others are the qualities of a scholar.”

“Why so, Uncle?”

“The reason for that is the grammar. In Sanskrit, verbs are separated right at the start: parasmi word and atmane word. That’s why the scholars divide parasmi and atmane.”

“Uncle, you said this too beautifully. If a king like Bhojaraja who patronised the virtuous heard you, he would have had gold anointment ceremony performed for you.”

“Forget gold anointment ceremony. I have not come across anyone who would perform grass anointment ceremony for me. What do I do with empty praises? Do I break my head with them or what?”

“Uncle, why are Brahmins miserly? Tell me that as well.”

“What do you expect of persons who in Sanskrit grammar are taught to learn by heart ten-ten ‘la’ (labdhi) ending words instead of acquiring the culture of the word ‘da’ (daana)? That’s why Brahmins know well how to take and not to give.”

“Uncle, you wise-crack about everything. Then tell me why Brahmins have such heightened sense of pleasure?” (rasikata)

Uncle said smilingly, “The reason is that they learn the lesson ‘Manorama kuchamardani’ and take a test also in that. Is there a grammar text book like this in any other language?”

“Uncle, there is none to match you in causing merriment with words. Tell me also why our Brahmins don’t think and discover new things?”

Uncle said sarcastically, “Right from the start, in ‘Laghu kaumudi’ they recite ‘...’ and so only that culture is assimilated in them.”

“It’s because of these words of yours that people call you as the one who scalds the Brahmins.”

Uncle smiled and said, “Arey, he’s the family priest of my in-laws. It doesn’t look all right if I don’t indulge in some pranks with him, does it?”

Hearing this, the Brahmin said, “Then you join me in a debate on the scriptures.”

Uncle replied: “I know the scholars who debate on the scriptures. They bring up issues which are unconnected and argue in a peculiar manner. They bamboozle the other side using high sounding words. The disputes don’t end until someone intervenes and restores order.”

The Brahmin proudly said, “In the matter of debate on avacchedana, can anyone stand up to us?

‘...’

‘O, master debaters, run, run, run. Simhabhattu, the one anointed as gajakesari on theoretical debates, is arriving.’”

Uncle smiled and said, “Three clever wrestlers went to the assembly of a king. The first announced his name as Aridalabhanjanasingh (the one who pulverises the enemy’s army). The second fellow twirling his moustache said he was Aridalabhujabal bhanjana singh (the one who destroys the shoulder power of the enemy). The third slapped his thighs and announced his name as Aridala patni pina payodharamandala manavimardana Singh (one who vanquished the pride of the breasts of the wives of the enemies). You are no different from those loquacious characters. Genuinely valorous persons don’t indulge in boasting. They demonstrate their valour in the war. The true Brahmins in other countries are inventing one new machine after another whereas here for thousands of years you are engaged in debates on utterly useless issues. You couldn’t proceed beyond the pots. Your arguments are like the roar of the dry clouds in the spring. Of course, in the name of all that some money necessarily falls into your hand.”

“Uncle, how do we distinguish a true Brahmin from a fake one?”

“The focus of a true Brahmin is on knowledge. The eye of the fake Brahmin is on the gifts and offerings. The true Brahmins are in search of good qualities, the fake Brahmins on finding money. The true Brahmins spread knowledge, the fake ones expand their tummies. The true Brahmins put an end to foolishness while the fake ones end only the sweetmeats.”

Just then a basket of sweetmeats arrived from Chowdhary’s house. The debate which continued until then ended fulfilling the adage that all debates must end on a sweet tone.

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Chapter 10.
THOUGHTS ON LIBERATION

Uncle was making badam milk. Just then our village Brahmin entered reciting a sloka:

'...'

'The cities of Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya, Kasi, Kanchi, Avantika and Puri are the gateways to salvation.'"

Sporting a smile, Uncle said, "Sir, you have shown the easiest route to liberation. You said these seven cities bestow salvation, didn't you? Then, why not buy a ticket to Ayodhya or Benaras and attain liberation? As per your words, liberation must have been booked in advance to the people living in those cities. Isn't that so?"

"I know you are heckling me but tell me if liberation isn't the ultimate goal of life?"

"It's only this goal that has converted us into an edible item. While the people of the rest of the world considered the world as a playground, we regarded it as a prison. 'Life is a trap. How do we get liberated from this?' This refrain has been our problem."

The Brahmin said, "From ancient times, our people have been having a spiritual outlook."

"Exactly! This is the disease that has afflicted us. The jaundice of spirituality is so widespread that the whole world appears to us as a blur, like everything is yellow in colour to a person afflicted with jaundice. The vice of liberation has gripped us more strongly than the opium. As a result, except for the desire to attain salvation, all other joys in life cannot be seen, like nothing is palatable during fever."

"Our experts were immersed in discovering the greatest of all joys," said the Brahmin.

"True. They ignored the earth and began to run after the *virat*," Uncle said. "They made efforts to build castles in the air. All the scriptures and puranas have become the agents of salvation. Godowns of salvation have been opened everywhere. And in them salvation is being traded in a big way. Many tricks, one up on another, have been discovered for attainment of salvation. 'If the nose is pressed like this, there won't be rebirth ('punarjanma na vidyate'); if donation is made like this 'punarjanma

na vidyate'; if bathed in a particular place of pilgrimage 'punarjanma na vidyate'; and if a particular mantra is recited 'punarjanma na vidyate'. As though punarjanma is an ogre, like it's a noose around the neck which has to be cast away as quickly as possible."

I interjected and asked, "Uncle, don't you believe in liberation?"

"Arey! When there is no root, where is the branch? When I don't believe in rebirth, what can I say of liberation?"

The Brahmin was itching for a debate on the scriptures. He was clearly incensed with Uncle's words. He said, "There is rebirth, surely. That's why the children who know nothing crawl up to the mother's breast soon after birth because of the habit in the previous birth."

Uncle smiled and said, "Sir, young women these days don't breast-feed. They feed them with milk bottles. That being so, in the next life, the kids should crawl up to the milk bottles, shouldn't they?"

"You find amusement in everything. But look at this. One is born clever and another dull. One is endowed with all organs and another handicapped. Why so?" the Brahmin asked.

"Sir, in a sugarcane field, one cane is big and another thin. One is crooked. One is sweeter, the other not so sweet. What's the reason?" retorted Uncle.

The Brahmin replied, "It's due to the difference in the seed, the land, the fertilizer, et cetera."

"Then assume that the same happens in the case of children too."

"Don't you believe in the causes which are invisible?" the Brahmin asked.

Uncle replied: "Look. There are some causes which are unseen. For example, you have a red mole on your cheek. The reason for that is not known. That's what I call an unseen reason."

"You have changed the meaning itself. My question was whether you believe in the effect of karma or not," the Brahmin said.

"I do when there is a relationship between cause and effect. For instance, the paddy crop this time was good because the field was watered well. Because of shortage of water, the vegetable crop withered. This does not happen because of the karma of past life. When the cause of the effect is seen right in front, why should we take shelter under an unseen cause?"

The Brahmin said, “That means you are a votary of what you see. If there is no invisible force, how does it happen that one is born a king and another beggar?”

“Sir, god does not make some as kings and others as beggars. We create this social circle and that keeps changing with passage of time. Now in America and Russia no one is born a king or a beggar.”

“There is no escape from the fruits of one’s actions,” said the Brahmin.

“Sir, please explain in detail. Are there accounts of karma deeds in the other world like there are debits and credits in bank accounts? Will the things that we do and what we enjoy get into those accounts book?”

“Of course!”

“And when credit equals debit, that means when there is no balance in the accounts of the fruits of our deeds, do we attain salvation?”

“Exactly!”

“That means, it is good to enjoy the fruits of our deeds as much as possible!”

“Surely! ‘…’ ‘The deeds that we enjoy would be destroyed when we experience them.’ ”

Uncle said, “If that is so, it has to be stated that people should go through the fruits of their karma. One is suffering from pain; another from hunger. Yet another is suffering from the blows of a cane. Some helpless woman is molested. What’s the point in rushing to help them? Leave them to their fate. The more their suffering the more their sins would be washed off! Why should there be an intervention and become a hurdle in their path to salvation?”

The Brahmin did not know how to counter this argument. He did not know how to connect destiny with the present event. He had to say something and so he said, “ ‘…’ “Action, whether good or bad, has to be gone through.’ All creatures have to be born in the vagina of an animal or a bird or an insect or a plant and experience pain or pleasure.”

Uncle said, “Look at this. Plague spreads and hundreds die. Earthquakes bury thousands. Cyclones destroy lakhs of mosquitoes. Would the granter of the fruits of karma have designed these events in advance?”

No specific answer occurred to the Brahmin.

Uncle asked again. “All right. I will ask you one another thing. Tell me what is more prevalent on the earth today - piety and righteousness or adharma and sin.”

“In Kali Yug, sin is more prevalent.”

"One who sins should not be born of the human vagina, is that not so?"

"Yes."

"Then, the population must decrease. No? But why does it increase day by day?"

The Brahmin had no answer.

"Pain or pleasure is the result of sin or punya. Is that not so?" Uncle said.

"Yes," the Brahmin replied.

"If that is so, do we have to understand that the oxen that till the land are paying for the sins committed in the previous birth whereas the bulls which roam about the streets of Kashi eating delicious food had done punya in the previous birth?"

The Brahmin kept quiet.

Uncle said, "Sir, look at this. People who live in America eat four-four times a day milk and butter. Here, for us, even butter milk is a luxury. That means, in the previous births, they must have all been pious. When put differently, it means that all the pious people are born only in America these days."

The Brahmin said, "Indirectly, you say that because we were sinners in the previous births, we are enduring pain in this country now, don't you?"

"I don't believe in the previous birth at all. I only seek to know in detail the doctrine from those who do."

"You argue like Charvaka. We don't enter into a debate with atheists."

"Sir, this is the biggest flaw in you and your ilk. You dismiss the opponent as an atheist. You never make an attempt to understand. The edifice of your faith stands on the foundation of 'soul'. It's upon that foundation that you build the building of rebirth and the fruits of karma and hoist the flag of liberation or salvation. But today the science cuts at its base. The soil beneath the soul theory caves in. Once this pillar is broken, your vast building will collapse. The castle in the air will collapse, like a pack of cards. Where do you go then? Isn't what you believe to be a strong pillar merely a bund of soil which gives in. Isn't what you have held firmly believing it to be the branch of a tree only a slithering snake which falls off with a thud?"

The Brahmin said, "The Katopanishad delves into the journey of the human soul through the cycle of rebirth. There Yama instructs on the existence of the Self as distinct from the body."

"Sir, Katopanishad contains a wasteful debate. Yama deceived Nachiketa taking him for a mere kid. In the beginning, he threw a tantrum saying that he should not compel him to reveal the secret. But what did he do at the end? He sang the same old song - the soul song. At the end '…' 'We should all unite and revolt'. Nachiketa was a fool. That's why he didn't know he was duped. The question that he posed remained unanswered. What did he get? He was like a person who dug the mountain just to take out a mouse. Today's scientists are not the soul arguers like Nachiketa in order to be duped. They are Chekitans."

"The time to go to the college is up. '…' Arguments and counter arguments add to the philosophical knowledge," the Brahmin said.

"You are welcome. '…' but it should not mean that arguments and counter arguments should be at the expense of logic. These days, it won't do to recite the Upanishads. Any doctrine has to necessarily pass the test in the assembly of critics."

After the Brahmin left, I said, "Uncle, you landed him into trouble. Of course, that is a great pastime for you. But please tell me whether there is anything like the Self or any such thing when the body dies?"

"That's what is not clear. When the body dies, on what basis does chaitanya, which depends on the brain, exist? '…' (Charvaka)

"When the clock is broken, how does its 'tick' 'tick' sound continue?"

"Uncle, our people say that the Self (soul) is like a bird in the cage and that it flies off the body after death, doesn't it?"

"My child, it's on this fiction that the edifice of rebirth stands. If there is no soul, where is rebirth? Who will bear the fruits of karma? If these are not there, what is the sense of salvation? Today's scientists don't believe in the existence of the soul. The body is not a cage. It is like a computer. There is no bird in that. They say it has small and large machines. Even the psychological acts too are assumed to be the magic of the body machine. If this is proved, the soul will be finished. There will be nothing left."

"If there is no merit in 'soul theory', how did it hold the field for so long?"

"Look son, the idea of divinity was created in order to escape from the fear of death. The concept of rebirth has been created so that the poor don't become disillusioned when they see the rich leading a luxurious life. The idea of rebirth placates the mind. The thought that 'He has sweetmeat because he was pious whereas I'm eating this dry roti because I'm a sinner' works like a balm to the wound

of grief. We take solace in the thought that if we do good in this birth we will have a good life in the next birth. Because of this deception, many stoically endure the trials of life hoping to earn merit. They perform yagna, yaga, pilgrimages and other rituals, make donations and engage in many other pious deeds. Behind all these, there is just one thought at work: 'Earn great luxury for the future'. One person dreams of heaven, and another immerses in the fictional salvation. The practitioners desire to insure heaven or salvation by paying the maximum fee in this life. This business is dubbed as 'piety' by some. I have no faith in this insurance company though. I pay instalments all my life and what if at the end it turns out to be a bogus company? That's why Charvaka said, '…' 'Today's pigeon is more precious than the peacock which may be available tomorrow.'

"It's foolish to forsake the pigeon in hand today hoping that tomorrow a peacock may be caught. What wisdom is it to throw away this badam milk being under the illusion that in the heaven a celestial damsel would serve ambrosia?"

"Uncle, that means you have no faith in liberation."

"I know just this. '…' 'Death of the body is liberation.'

"The day this body is decayed, that day naturally there is relief or liberation from all pains. This liberation is bound to be attained some day, whether I desire it or not. That being the case, why should I agitate my mind thinking about it? Why should I lose my peace of mind?"

"You mean to say that there is no use trying to attain liberation, don't you, Uncle?"

"You may try to attain liberation. Liberation means 'release from foolishness'. The worst of all foolishness is the blind belief in liberation. Escaping from this desire of liberation would mean attainment of the highest state of liberation."

"Uncle, how do those who are liberated from life look like?"

"Arey, child. I have not seen one till now. If I had seen one, I would have hit him with my cane and tested his equanimity," Uncle said, breaking into a loud cackle. "The luckless run after liberation. The lucky ones sit happily and get rid of all the ties and attain liberation while being alive."

"How, Uncle?"

Uncle smiled and said, "There is neither a prescription nor a proscription for one who is beyond everything. Is that not so?

'…' (Sankaracharya)

'The luckless dry up their body by fasting and exposing to the sunrays.'

'…'

'Visalakshi's breasts have assumed a crooked shape after they were pressed during the embrace.' They loot such joy. For them-

'…' 'Untying the sari knot is the salvation.'"

"Uncle, for you everything is an object of ridicule but Gautama, Kanada, Kapila, and others have discoursed a lot on liberation. Do you mean to say that all of that is a waste?"

Uncle said smilingly, "There is no chaitanya or joy in Gautama or Kanada's salvation. It's like lifeless, stone-like, inert state. That's why a critic strongly condemned it like this-

'…'

'…'

"Another impatiently said, '…'

'Instead of attaining salvation like a stone it's better to be born like a fox in Brindavan.'"

"Why did then Guatama advocate such salvation?"

"Arey, he cursed his wife and turned her into a stone. From then onwards, he became so stone-hearted that under the alibi of liberation, he advocated everyone to become a stone. I don't want salvation of such inert nature."

"But in Sankhya salvation, there is '*chit*' philosophy. What about that?"

"Arey, there too there is no joy. What's the use of being inert? Where is *purushartha* in getting mauled in the wrestling bout?"

I said, "Vedantic salvation has *sat, chit and ananda*, isn't it?"

"Yes, they are there. But what use is that ananda when I'm not there? What's the meaning of marriage when there's no bridegroom? '…' (Those who are unmoved of anything and remain still in mind are fools. Those who are madly after attaining Brahmi state would do well to savour Brahmi herb."

"Do you mean to say that liberation is all a humbug?"

"When the one who propounded it (the Buddha) himself says. 'Everything is void' where is the need to ask anyone else about it?"

"What's your personal view?"

"You know it, don't you?

'…'

(There's neither heaven nor hell. There's no rebirth. Nothing remains after death. Liberation means destruction of the body.)

"It's good so long as such despicable liberation doesn't come. If it comes, where's the room for worldly pleasures? These pleasures wouldn't decrease at all after us. The hubbub would continue. 'Alas! We won't be there' is the only regret," Uncle said, picking up the badam glass and gulping it.

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Chapter 11.
ANCIENT CULTURE

It was wintry night. Uncle sat next to the fireplace, driving away the cold. I too went and sat next to him. He was in an 'archival' mood. The discussion veered to culture.

I said, "Look, Uncle. The rishis and sages of that time led such a good life. They lived in hermitages. They woke up in the wee hours (Brahma muhurat) and bathed in the river. They wore clothes of coarse fibre. They kept water in kamandal. They slept on bed of grass (kusasan). Even today, people look up to them with devotion because of their saffron robes, long beard and matted locks of hair."

"Orey, there were no barbers in the forest and so the long beard. No washermen and so saffron clothes. No oil and so the matted hair. No cloth and so robes made of fibre. No proper houses and so parnasala. No cruse and so kamandal. No plates and so leaves or cupped hands. All this was not due to any sacrifice but due to lack of things."

"They were all stoics, were they not? They lived on roots and tubers."

"They had no choice, did they? If not tubers and roots, could they eat gulab jamun? If they had gulab jamun, would they have danced at the sight of figs and blue jamuns? '…' (Whoever moves forward would get honey. He alone would get figs.)

"Wherever he got honey, he would break into a song.

'…'

'Honey which trickles down is as holy as the ghee.'

"My son! It was all jungle then. They had to make do with whatever things were found in that environment such as the animal hides, tiger skin, kusasan, incense, sandal, yavas, honey, chamaram and leafy food plates. If today also, you want to see those scenes of Dwapara Yug, go to Jharkhand and you will find the bows and arrows, peacock feathers, the flute and women wearing one piece of cloth. If today's cloth mills and factories are all closed, all around you will again find the sages of those times."

"They did arduous penance, didn't they?"

"Arey, it's all a problem of the stomach that drove them to perform tapas. It was the same as tilling with the plough or praying to Shiva or holding the pickaxe, or holding the nose or waving the legs or clanging the bell."

"They were agnihotris, were they not?"

Uncle smiled and said, "I'm also an agnihori, am I not? This pot belly is the largest of all *havan* pot. Everyday I shove firewood into that. The question in the Vedic time was –

'…'

'To which god shall the havis be offered?'

"My reply to that is – '…' (to the god known as the stomach.)"

"Uncle, they performed sacrifices for spiritual reasons."

"I would say they did that only for the physical reasons. Before the Vedic times, they had no knowledge of fire. They were wonder-struck at the sight of forest fire or the lightning. Later on the sages like Angira and others realised that fire could be created out of rubbing flint. Once they knew this, they began to dance in ecstasy. The meat of living and the dead creatures tasted better and more easily digestible when cooked on fire. That's why they began to worship fire as 'amaad' and as 'kravyaad'. Earlier they ate raw yavas and gingili seeds. Now they realised the taste of popping. They shivered in the cold in the past. Now they had the pleasure of warming up by the fireplace. Earlier, they hid at night out of fear. Now in the glow of fire, they could see things. They began to sing 'tamasoma jyothirgamaya' (lead me from darkness to light). As the predators ran away at the sight of leaping fire they began to sleep without any worry. When they derived such benefits from the Firegod, how could they not praise him? That's why the Vedas are full of His praise.

'…'

'I worship firegod who is the priest of gods.'"

"But the secret of agnihotra…" I said.

"I hope you are not much busy with work. Then listen to this. Once they knew how to make fire, our ancestors realised that they possessed a mighty powerful thing. But, they had to struggle a lot to make fire. They used flint stones to create the spark. But rubbing the stones took hours. Then they fanned the spark to create fire. The fire so created had to be protected with a great deal of care. They began to keep the fire always lit by pouring ghee on the logs. They placed stones around the fire to protect it. They cut clay on all four sides and made platforms. In the middle, they hung a log of wood. To protect it during the rainy season, they constructed a pandal of thatch above it. They sat in that enclosure and served fire. They gave whatever was required to keep the fire lit. Many sang in encouragement. Brahmins sat there and supervised

the ritual. Everyone was assigned a specific task. One cut the logs of wood, another brought hay. Yet another toiled to make slanted thatched roof. One made pots out of clay and burnt them. Daughters milked the cows, sheep and the goats. They washed and cleaned meat. The grains were pounded on stones. Some picked soma creeper. Some others crushed and made juice out of it. They got on to the platform and drank the juice. Milk, curds and ghee reached there in plenty. First, the firegod was given the offering. The balance was distributed to others. The platform where they all sat together and drank soma could be called the man's first 'club'. They all sang in merriment '...'.

'We have to walk together; talk together and must understand one another.'

'...'

'Protecting one another, let us all enjoy and do things together!"

"They preformed marriages and such like good things there. They went around the holy fire. They distributed pop corn. They ground somalatha in the mortar. The relics of those ancient times are found even now here and there."

"Uncle, what was the goal of life those days?"

"In Vedic hymns, it is evident ...

'Let's live for one hundred years. Let's be able to see for one hundred years. Let's be able to hear for one hundred years. Let our lineage flourish. Let our donors flourish.'

"Let our wealth and food grains increase. Let our cows give milk in abundance. Let the oxen till the land well. Let there be timely rains. Let the trees give fruits. Let our welfare be taken care of. Has anything been left out? In Durvakshata mantra, till today these blessings only are given –

'...'

"Uncle, what's the meaning of Durvakshata?"

"Arey, it means the wish that 'let there be plenty of durva (grass) for the cows and buffaloes and akshta (rice) for us'."

"Oh, how nice was their life!" I said.

Uncle said, "Arey, in Vedic times, people had a jolly good time. Eat, drink and be merry. But afterwards, the sages of Upanishads turned the spoilsports. They were so vicious that they incited people to fight against the sense organs. Arey, it's agreed that senses, like the horses, are unstable but that doesn't mean that they should be starved to death. If that's done, how will the chariot move? What's the use of just

holding the reins in the hands? Smrithikaras who followed them also came with the same whip of abstention. They proscribed what was not within their reach. It was like the sour grapes. On deep reflection, it is clear that incompetence is the root cause of disinterest."

"Uncle, in Satya Yug, people were god-like, were they not?"

"No. They were no different from us. The basic instincts of people don't change. Only the circumstances change. Those days, the population was not much. They were unable to consume all the food grains and the fruits that were grown. Atri had one thousand cows and Vasista two thousand. What to do with the milk, curds and the ghee? That's why '…' 'The guest is like god'. Thereafter, the remainder was given in 'homam'. When things are abundant, theft is ruled out, isn't it? Now the population has increased much. But the earth remains just the same. The number of people who eat, like Surasa's (the ogre who accosted Hanuman en route Lanka and swallowed him) mouth, is becoming bigger and bigger. That's why anarchy has spread."

"Unlce, this is the effect of Kali Yug."

"Arey, if you have one hundred when you need only six, then that is Satya Yug. If the need is one hundred when there are only six, then that's Kali Yug. That's all. Before too, in times of drought and famine, the effect of Kali Yug was felt. Once there was no milk and therefore Aswatthama was fed water mixed with flour. Now you have crores of Aswatthamas in the country. Even now if the food is more than what can be consumed by the population, you'll find signs of Satya Yug again."

"Then, Uncle, is there no difference between the dharma of the ancient times and dharma of the modern times?"

"None but there is a difference in regard to money. Moral values are dictated by money. If you ask me, money is the root of dharma. Without money, any dharma or any ideal would have no meaning."

"How, Uncle?"

"Look. The greatest of all dharma is giving and kindness. When you have two fistfuls, donate one. What can be given by one who has nothing? That's why I say the root of dharma is money."

"But surely there are other kinds of dharma also?"

"Yes, there are. But when you examine it properly, without money no dharma has value. The sacredness of the cow and the Ganga rests on this premise. It's because of the cow's kindness that milk and curds are available. Cows help in farming. So, the

cow is the mother. Irrigation and commerce are because of the kindness of the Ganga. That's why the River Ganga also is the mother. There's an economic principle underlying all this."

"But our people attached least importance to wealth, didn't they?" I asked.

"Arey, the attitude that wealth is least important has been the cause of much harm, isn't it? Where has man changed? Wealth played a great role from the early ages. Kurukshetra happened because of that. It's raging now also. Gold and silver have the power to convert a lie into truth-

'...'

'The face of truth is covered with a gold bowl.'

"It was there then and is there now also."

"Uncle, if that's so, what's the difference between Kali Yug and Satya Yug?'

Uncle said, "Look-

'...'

'When the society is asleep, it's Kali Yug. When it yawns and stretches its limbs, it's Dwapara Yug. When it stands up, it's Treta Yug and when it walks and becomes active, it's Satya Yug.'

"But my interpretation of the above sloka is this. In Satya Yug, our ancestors roamed about freely like vagabonds. Treta Yug witnessed some stability. Janaka and others began to till the land. From the land, Sita was born in the form of food grains. People began to build houses and live in them. They could live in one place. In Dwapara Yug, the society became much more organised. Things which gave pleasure were discovered. People began to enjoy leisure. In Kali Yug, luxury goods are found in abundance. People have no worry and sleep well. Like this, culture has blossomed."

"Uncle, such progress had not happened before. Today, we sleep and travel thousands of miles in the trains. Those days, they had to trudge wearily along the jungle tracks."

"Yes. Those days, in the jungle, grass blades used to poke the feet like the goad. That's why the clever sastrakaras ordered 'pull out the grass and surge ahead.' Since no one would have cared for their words uttered normally, they made a sloka for this-

'...'

'Siva lives at the tip of the grass, Kesava in the middle and Brahma at the root. O! Earth, give me grass.'

'In the month of Bhadrapada, the forests were lush. So, that month was decided as the month for removing grass. Without any wages, just in the hope of earning some punya, the activity of removing grass was carried on. In upanayana, marriage, last rites, yagna, puja, et cetera use of sacred grass was made a pre-requisite. To make pavitri, trikusa, muda, kusasan, seating chairs and the like, people began to pull out grass. They said a house which did not have the sacred grass was not. A person who was skilful in pulling out grass was considered dexterous. '…' That means if someone asked 'kusalam' it meant whether there were enough stock of sacred grass stalks at home. Without spending one paisa, the activity of pulling out sacred grass used to be carried out with fervour. Son, the sastrakaras were the forerunners of Chanakya, were they not?"

"Uncle, the rishis were profound in their thinking, were they not?"

Turning the burning embers upside down, Uncle said, "Arey, son! Kapila, Kanaka and Goutama were poor Brahmins. They encountered untold sufferings in every step that they took. In the forests, grass blades and thorns pricked them. They had to endure the cold and the heat of the forests. That's why titksha (ability to endure both heat and cold) was regarded as a great virtue. In the rainy season, water used to leak in the parnasala. Snakes and insects used to crawl inside. Then the menace of the monkeys and the bears, fear of the tigers and the lions. They had light refreshment of anything that was available; otherwise they went without food. The stomach used to be stuck to the ribs. Added to this was the fright caused by the nocturnal creatures. There was no end to their grief. In such circumstances, what would they say but 'grief-grief'? In such a backdrop, what 'ism' would they embrace but stoicism? The tune of hopelessness that they breathed was such that people are still singing the same tune, that is, that 'The world is a myth'. Since women and gold were beyond their reach, the heaviest blow landed on these two-

'…'

'The two fruits adorning the poisonous tree of family are gold and two breasts.'

"Uncle, it was due the supernatural intuition of the great rishis that philosophy such as Vedanta was born, wasn't it?"

Uncle smiled and said, "I for one think that it was because of their idiocy that Vedanta was born."

Uncle saw that I was surprised by this. So, he resumed and said, "Son! When the aged rishis stirred out in the night to attend to the call of nature, now and then they

started at the rope mistaking it for snake. Based on this myth, they began to believe that the entire world also was a myth. That myth took the form of Vedanta and caused consternation. Whether due to their myopia or our ill luck, mythical philosophy became our main philosophy. '…' (the myth of a rope being looked upon as snake). From this 'bhrama vada' arose 'brahma vada'.

"Uncle, you can make a bull into a pig and a pig into a bull! Where's the link between a rope and philosophy!"

Uncle piped up. "Arey, rope was the basis for Nyaya, Sankhya, Vedanta, etc. philosophies. 'Triguna' (satva, rajo, tamas gunas) had their origins in the three layers of rope. The net of the earthly ties was woven with the rope."

"Then, do you mean that the theory of karma also has no basis?" I asked.

Uncle replied, "Look. Philosophy is a product of the conditions of the society. Agriculture and rishis were important in the country. Karma theory was carved out of the experience of agriculture. The crop depends on the kind of seeds sown. Like a roasted seed which cannot sprout, karma which is without a goal cannot bear fruit. Likewise, seeing a potter, the myth of the creator of the universe originated. The revolving potter's wheel gave rise to 'bhavachakra' myth. The blacksmith's anvil gave rise to kutastha brahma, Brahma who always remained in one form. Looking at a deceitful lass 'maya' was created."

"Uncle, there are many deep issues embedded in philosophical thoughts. No?"

"The essence of all issues is the same that there is no essence in the world. So, leave it at that. Arey, we'll know about the essence of anything after we enter into it, isn't it? '…' 'Only the son-in-law and not the father has a measure of the essence of the beauty of a young woman.' The philosophers miserably failed to understand worldly pleasures. Like some sons-in-law these days who run away from the in-laws' house complaining of inadequate dowry and presents, they used to run away from this world. Arey, there was one known as nirasana gosai. His wife ran away to some place. Then on, he made it his duty to abuse all women in many ways. Nivritti marga philosophers are also like him."

"But, Vedas and Vedanta espouse the welfare of all in the world, isn't it?"

Uncle said, "Both worship selfishness. The Vedas said it straight. (…) 'The cattle are created for the yagnas'. '…' 'Vedic violence is not violence.' That means there is no blemish in eating meat. Vedanta smeared divine ointment to it. '…' Atma, which is present now and forever, is indestructible even after the body perishes. Vedic people

worshipped many gods. For Vedanta people '…', that means Self was regarded as the highest god and it was worshipped. Individualism in the Vedas was assigned an exalted status. That in my view is the meaning of Vedanta."

"Uncle, what of the preachings of Brahma gyan, renunciation and the like?"

"Look, when the poor rishis felt distressed at seeing the rich, they said, '…' (treat the clod of earth, stone and gold all alike.) Where's the comparison between the clod of earth and gold? But when in grief, they consoled themselves by saying there was no difference between pain and pleasure.

'…'

'Pleasure and pain, profit and loss and victory and defeat must be treated alike.'

"When their self esteem was affected, they espoused equanimity.

'…'

'One who does not get affected by grief and who does not desire pleasure is a man of equanimity.'

'When their lowliness stared at them in their face, they said 'aham brahmasmi' (I'm the Brahma) and fulfilled their strong desire. When their desires were not fulfilled, they announced that peace would be the result of eschewing all desires.

'…'

'He who forsakes all desires, and who has no interest in anything and who is without arrogance and attachment would attain peace.'

"What's all this about? It's like reciting the name of Rama after being vanquished!"

"Uncle, absence of desire was thought as the best and therefore did they not accept sacrifice willingly?"

"No. During those times too, there were rishis who, like the heads of some mutts today, lived in huge palaces. They feasted on good food. Looking at them, the poor people were jealous. In Chandogya Upanishad (5/11/1), such wealthy pundits were hailed as '…' (One belonging to an exalted house, a great Vedic scholar). Mundakopanishad (1/13) talks of '…'. In Katopanishad, Yamacharya (the preceptor) tries to entice Nachiketa by offering palaces, elephants, horses, beautiful damsels and the like. Some pundits had such great income from their male and female disciples that they could lead a princely life. Take a look at the story of Rykva rishi in Chandogya. A king named Janaasrutha went to the sage with an offer to donate a lot of wealth and six cows. The rishi didn't accept them. Then, the king took more gold, precious stones, ghee, cows, the deed of land of the zamindar of that village and his

beautiful daughter. The moment he saw the face of the young woman, he accepted her and all the other donations.

'...'

'His spirituality was melted by the heat of the metaphysical things.'"

While I kept looking at his face, Uncle said, "Son! Even in that Yug, babas were overwhelmed by desire. They recited the song of renunciation for others' consumption. Their nerves craved for fun and frolic. Though they had their heads shaven, the snake-like umbrella over their head always was open and swayed merrily. Vedanta comes to fore at the time of be-dant (the toothless). The tongue is still there for slurping the juice. The tusks of desire would never break. It's impossible to have control over the senses, like the tongue that has no bones. Where is the power for 'damam' (to control the senses) in Vedanta to control the senses? It's a myth to feel proud that the self has been conquered. Anyway for a few centuries, we have been playing on the shehnai the spiritual tune of soham, daasoham, sadaasoham."

I butted in and said, "Uncle, Atmanand Swamy who in his discourse on philosophy says materialism is the root cause of all evils."

Uncle was acerbic. He said, "True. He would speak loudly on the physical loud speaker after drinking cold water from the physical fridge and blame materialism. Thereafter, his spiritual disciples will send his speech through the physical telegram to the physical press for printing the message 'banish materialism'. Truth to say, these Atmanands are all 'motoranands' and 'dhananands', 'mudranands', 'modakanands' and 'madananands'. They are always immersed in these five 'anands'. They collect pearls from the lake of paramanand. So, they are addressed as 'paramahansas'. And their blind disciples blow their trumpets. His female disciples drink water in which he his toe id dipped. These siddha mahatmas turn out to be drowned in total darkness when you find them in person alone. The saffron robes become darker with the kama, krodh, moha, lobha. Look at the satire that Valmiki employs in Ramayana-

'...'

'Lakshmana! Look at how the saintly crane deceptively walks as though it is worried about the creatures that it might trample upon!

'The fish in Sanskriti pushkar not knowing that disciples who are cat-like and blue-coloured jackals have been there for ages are still taking shelter under their feet. '...' (You never know when the protector becomes the devourer)."

"Uncle, the Swamiji proves through 'anaswa rath' (the chariot without horses) mentioned in the Rig Veda (4/36/1) that there were aeroplanes in the ancient times."

Uncle smirked and said, "Arey, those who prove things are a great lot. They show 'tasmai sreeguravennamah' (salutations to the teacher) and collect from the disciples 'tasma ee' (kheer). One of my friends says Krishna drank tea because in Bhagavadgita at a place it is said, 'yada samharate chayam'. Likewise, in future a researcher might say that 'om' in Veda means 'omlette'."

"Uncle, I forgot to tell you something. Tomorrow, a big yagna is going to be performed. It will mean 'akhanda havan'. Twenty tins of ghee have arrived."

Beating his brow, Uncle said, "What can be said of the heightened sense of our people? There is no ghee for food but no shortage at all for burning. When there was no matchstick, our ancestors kept the fire going by pouring ghee. What's the point in wasting tins of ghee when a matchstick is sufficient to make fire? The snake crawled and has gone somewhere but we still are beating its track!"

"Uncle, it's said that smoke causes rain and for that yagna is performed. Is that true?"

"If smoke causes rain, these days lakhs of chimneys, engines emit smoke day and night. Then where's the need to create smoke?"

"Why don't you go and make people understand this?"

"That surely would be inviting trouble for myself. What can one jester do when there are so many traditionalists? Well, let the ghee be burnt in plenty. Rishi Charvaka had said this-

'…' 'Drink ghee even if you must borrow for buying it. You follow the principle '…' (Burn ghee even if you must borrow). If you can't burn ghee, how will our culture survive?"

***

Chapter 12
BHAGAVATA

Vikatakavi Uncle was inebriated. He had drunk milk-coloured bhang mixed with rose petals.

I said, “Uncle, in Brahmasthan, the story of Bhagavata is being recited.”

Uncle said, “That means something terrible is going to happen.”

“Why?” I asked.

Uncle said, “Arey, the village girls will go astray by hearing and reading about raasaleela; Krishna stealing the cloths of gopikas and the like. Of course, you don’t have the Yamuna bank here. But you do have the bank of the river Kamala, don’t you?”

“You must be kidding as usual, Uncle!”

“Not at all. I’m telling the truth.

‘…’

“‘Father, mother, brother and the husband tried to stop and yet those women set out of their homes crazily for rendezvous with Krishna at night.’ You tell me if this is anything acceptable?”

“But scholars say rasaleela and Krishna stealing cloths have philosophical meanings, don’t they?”

Uncle said, “You think I’m mad? My hair hasn’t turned grey just like that. I have studied all the eighteen Puranas. Brahmavarata Purana is right in front of me now also.”

I said, “In that Purana, there must be discussion about only Brahma, no?”

Uncle said, “I presume you are not in a hurry. So, sit and listen to this. Take a look at the description of Krishna stealing the cloths. The women were naked. They were taking their bath standing in the river Yamuna. Their cloths were on the bank. Krishna picked up their cloths and climbed up the Kadamba tree and perched on the overhanging branch, he said-

‘…’

‘O, naked Gopikas, what will you do now?”

“Then Radha ordered her friends to move and capture the mischievous fellow. Then –

'...'

'As ordered by Radha, all the women, covering their private parts with their hands, angrily came out of the water to capture Krishna. But the wanderer of the Brindavan was ready to face this gang of women and said, -

'...'

'Let me see what your leader Radha can do to me now.'

"Hearing this, Radha burst out laughing. Anger gave way to desire and she was singed by lust.

'...'

"Then –

'...'

'The desire of the hero and the desire of the heroine were fulfilled. The nude women focussed their mind on Krishna and became interested in the erotic sport. The author of the Purana says that the girls who hear this story would fulfil their desire also and he showers his blessings on the girls like this-

'...'

'If young girls hear this stotra with devotion for one year, they will surely get a husband who is as romantic as Krishna. "Do you still have any doubts?"

I said, "Uncle, the rasa sport must definitely have some deeper meaning."

Uncle said, "Then you must hear this too-

'...'

(On a full moon night, the ideal place for the amorous sport is the bank of the river Yamuna. That is a lonely place. Women who were lustful were engaged in the sport without any care. One took away the flute of Muralidhara. Another disrobed him of his white cloth. One sat in his lap. Another jumped and sat on his shoulder and said, 'Won't you please bite my cheek?' and yet another said, 'Won't you nip my breast with your nails?') Child, has your doubt been cleared at least now or not?"

When he found me quiet and unresponsive, he said, "If not, hear this also-

'...'

"Uncle, tell me the meaning of this to me."

Uncle said, "Arey, what do you want me to say? The young women were sexually excited and were unabashed. One pulled him to her side after undressing him. He was naked. Another repeatedly embraced him and planted kisses on his cheeks and lips. One hugged him. One Gopika disrobed her friend and threw her at him. One

surrendered herself to him. Then the orgy took place. Son, I deduce that it is from this 'rasachakra' that 'bhairavichakra' must have been born."

"Your words surprise me Uncle. But Krishna was a Yogiswar, wasn't he?"

Uncle said, "If he was a Yogiswar, just look at what kind of a Bhogiswar he was – '…'

'Krishna nipped the breasts of Gopikas with his nails. He did the same on their healthy buttocks. Then that rasikeswara in a pleasant disposition made them happy with nine kinds of embraces, eight kinds of kisses and sixteen kinds of intercourse.'

"What else could be there to describe?" Uncle said.

"Uncle, that love was not physical."

Uncle said, "You seem to refuse to understand. Listen to this in detail- '…'

'Krishna, who was the ultimate romantic, went to the rati mandiram with Radha and he lay on the lovely bed with her. Then he pulled her towards him and left imprints of his nails on her chest, buttocks and breasts.'

I said, "But Lord Krishna was then a child, wasn't he? That wasn't love but the pranks of a child."

Uncle was irritated. He said, "…' (There's no medicine for foolishness.) Once three fools went to their in-law's home. One fellow began to count the value the clothes and ornaments of his bride after she reached the nuptial bed when there was no other person. '…' 'When it was time to remove the sari, for him it was time to think of its cost.' By the time he had done with the additions and subtractions, the night had gone. The second fellow's wife came with the necklace of pogada flowers adorning her neck. During the romantic antics, the thread snapped. He picked up a needle and thread and spent the rest of the night in stringing the flowers into a garland again. The third fellow felt that the rope cot was a little loose. He removed the rope and began to weave it around the cot again. By the time the cot was ready, it was daybreak. These three great men were Mulyacharya, Malacharya and Khatwacharya. What do I call you? Balyakreedacharya or what?"

"Uncle, what some Puranic scholars say is that Krishna was nine years old then."

Uncle said sarcastically, "True, he was playing in the lap of Radha! You only bought and gave him a ball, didn't you? Don't allow me to display my temper!"

I fell silent. Uncle was agitated. He said, "I must drive away your illusions. So, hear this also. After the sport on the ground, look at the sport in water-

'...'

'After their sexual intercourse in the bedroom, they both moved over and got into the waters of Yamuna. Krishna pulled out her sari and she was completely naked. Then he embraced Radha and they both dunked into water. Then Radha suddenly came out and held Krishna firmly. Krishna too bobbed up, held her and smilingly kissed her bare breasts many times.'

"Arey, when this kind of erotic activity was going on, you still liken it to yoga and not bhoga! Don't you have any sense?"

"Yet, Lord Krishna was 'askhalita', chaste, wasn't he?" I said.

Uncle raised his voice and rebuked me, "If he was askhalita, how was Pradyumna born? After such detailed explanation also, you still are mumbling, 'ifs' and 'buts'. Now hear me attentively –

'...'

'After having sexual intercourse many times in that lonely place, Radha and Krishna disappeared. Radha was completely naked and was still very amorous. She was dishevelled. Her hair was undone. Madava then put his imprint on the cheeks and breasts of naked Radha. They both had sex for thirty nights and days without interruption. Yet, they were not in the least satisfied.' Many gods and goddesses thronged the sky to watch this. They were all surprised and pleased. The goddesses singed with jealousy. The writer's commentary on this reads like this-

'...'

'The lust of the amorous can never be satiated. Like ghee which stokes fire and makes it flare up, lust will further grow ...'

"Are you through with your illusions or not yet?"

I was unhappy. I said, "Uncle, what was the need for the writers of the Puranas to depict Radha and Krishna in such vulgar terms?"

Uncle said, "If it's not like that, how will the listeners be happy? How will the story teller make money? It's on the lustful only that the gold reigns, isn't it? So, in the name of gods and goddesses, they described *unmukta* intercourse. They did not leave Brahma, or Vishnu or Siva."

"Did they describe Siva and Parvathy also in similar manner?"

Uncle said, "In 'Ganapathy Khand' Parvathy was subjected to the same postures as Radha in 'Srikrishna Janmakhand'. See this-

'...'

'Siva, the god of gods, took her to a lonely place. There, on the bank of the river Narmada, in the garden of flowers, he made a bed decorating it with flowers and sandal which would add to the carnal desires and had intercourse with her. O! Narada, according to the calendar of gods, their extreme kind of intercourse in different postures continued for thousands of years. Yet Siva who was a yogi didn't withdraw from sex.'

"According to the calendar of gods, the intercourse of Siva and Parvathy continued uninterrupted for thousands of years. Yet, Siva didn't release the semen. Then a worried Vishnu ordered Brahma like this-

'...'

'Just now go with the entire army of gods and find a way to see that Siva's semen is discharged on the earth.' Then Indra, Chandra, Pavana and the other gods went there and began to extol the virtues of Siva. That caused interruption in his intercourse.

'...'

'Siva faltered. He felt discomfiture. He suddenly released Parvathy who had held him tightly at his neck. As he was about to get up, his semen fell on the earth. Out of that Kartikeya was born.' The army of gods was scared of Parvathy and ran helter-skelter. Yet, Parvathy did not relent and cursed –

'...'

'From this day the semen of gods shall be wasted!'

I asked, "Why did she curse like this?"

Uncle said, "It will not do to just read 'Vatsyayana Bhashya' (the legal treatise). You should also read 'Vatsyayana Kamasutra'. Read this. Parvathy herself explains the matter to Siva in detail-

'...'

'There's no greater grief to women than interruption of coitus or when the semen is discharged not in the vagina but outside.'

"Then Siva persuaded her in many ways. Thereafter, they resumed their intercourse. But –

'...'

'When it was time for release of the semen, Vishnu assuming the form of a Brahmin entered the vagina and said, "I have been hungry for seven days. Help me break my fast." Hearing this, Parvathy got up suddenly. Then-

'...'

'Semen fell on the bed. It didn't fall in the vagina.'

"It's from this that Vinayaka was born."

When Uncle found me stupefied, he smiled and said, "There's another deeper meaning in this story which is that if during the intercourse a hungry Brahmin arrives, he must be given food first. It's only thereafter that other needs should be fulfilled. Those huge tummy gods are really blessed."

"Uncle, what profane kinds of things are there in the Puranas?"

Uncle said, "There are things which appear as though they were written in a state of intoxication. Alas! Brahma was meted out a worse treatment!"

"What? Brahma ill-treated in Brahmaviavarta purana?"

"Listen to that also then. Once youthful Mohini who was sexually aroused begged Brahma to have intercourse with her. The aged Brahma indicated his inability and advised her to find a romantic young man instead. However much she coaxed him, he didn't yield. Then Mohini scolded him thus-

'...'

'One who discerns the desire of the woman without being asked and has sex with her is uttama purusha. One who fulfils her desire after expressing her interest in him is madhyama purusha. A man who doesn't agree to intercourse when a woman who is aroused urges him repeatedly when they are alone is not a man at all. He's impotent.'

"Despite hearing this, Brahma remained inert. Then Mohini who was angry and sexually excited cursed him like this-

'...'

'O! Brahma, you are Jagannatha and Vedakarta. Still you coveted your daughter. Then you didn't think it was wrong. I'm like your servant. Obedient. I sought your shelter due to divine blessings. Such woman that I'm, you are arrogantly speaking to me and ridiculing me. You shall not be worshipped!'

Then Brahma's four faces went ashen. He ran to Vishnu Lok. There Lord Vishnu too chided him –

'...'

'Even those who have conquered senses should not disappoint a woman who surrenders desiring sex in a lonely place. One who insults such a woman without any doubt is guilty.'

Lakhmi also scolded Brahma a lot-

'When a prostitute begged for sex, why didn't Brahma fulfil her desire? Spurning a woman who approaches for sex is a great insult to the woman.'

"Then she also cursed Brahma-

'...'

'Due to the curse of the prostitute you have become unfit for worship. No one will recite your mantra. Your worship can take place only in the company of worship of other gods, not alone.'

I was upset and said, "Such insult to the old Prajapathi?"

Uncle said, "Arey, they made his situation worse than even this. They blamed him about his own daughter-

'...'

'When she realised that he was burning with a desire to have intercourse with her, she was frightened and ran away.'

"Women said 'chee, chee' to Brahma-

'...'

'You are the Vedakarta. Yet you sought to have sex with your daughter. Kamarta, go far, far away from us.'

"Brahma was abashed and prepared himself to commit suicide.

'...'

I said, "Uncle, such misery to Brahma in Brahmavaivarta Purana? Could there be anything worse than this?"

"In Brahma Purana also, Brahma was meted out similar treatment. Look at what Brahma says-

'...'

'Once when a homam was being performed at Siva's abode, I looked at Parvathy's toe lustfully and instantly I ejaculated. Feeling abashed, I rubbed off the erupting semen with my little finger. From out of the crushed semen were born Valakhilya munis.'

"Uncle, how did such vulgar things get into the Puranas? They may be spurious, can't they?"

"Whether they are spurious or hidden is unknown but what's true is that the authors of the Puranas totally defamed the gods. Instead of the gods of the Puranas, they have become dolls made of butter. They melt at the sight of some heat. It hardly mattered where and when. '...' (He released semen. The semen dropped.) As though

it was like milk and honey prasad flowing out of a pipe instead of semen. Mere touch is enough for it to leak!"

"Why are such things described so unabashedly in the Puranas?" I asked.

Uncle said, "Vyasa, the author of the Puranas, wrote out of his personal experiences. He melted like butter the moment he saw Ghritachi, didn't he?

'...'

'He developed such passion at the sight of the angel Ghritachi that he suddenly ejaculated and his semen fell in 'arani' (contraption used to make fire in yagna).'

"Since it happened to him like that, he made Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and such like gods and women too ejaculate without any hesitation -

'...'

'The moment he saw the beautiful Parvathy, that Danujeswara ejaculated and released semen. All his organs became inert.'

"They didn't hesitate to say this to women about them-

'...'

'The vagina of women becomes moist when they see a handsome man.'

"This could have been conveyed in a more acceptable manner, couldn't it?" Uncle asked.

I said, "Uncle, where was the need for the Puranas to be filled with so many details of adultery?"

Uncle said, "A critic has supplied an answer to your question –

'...'

'The Purana writers generally have this weakness for the prostitutes. So, there's no need to dilate on this. Vyasa, the original writer of the Puranas, and his son, Sukadeva, were born out of adultery.'

"That being so, why shouldn't Vyasa not create such Puranas?"

I said, "Uncle, if you sat there on the platform and commented on the Puranas that would cause havoc. And the people would have lost faith in Vyasa and Parasara, wouldn't they?"

Uncle picked up a pinch of snuff, inhaled it and said, "Arey, why talk of only Vyasa or Parasara? All the romantic poets described intercourse on some pretext or the other. They satisfied their hunger for lust through vulgar descriptions. In the name of god and goddesses they indulged in mental prostitution. That's the reason for the Puranas to have descriptions of nudity which attempt to be one up on another. They

are full of waves in the ocean of sex. The raconteurs and the listeners feel excited in the name of dharma in the same way as those seeing the erotic sculptures in Puri and Bhubneswar temples.

"While demonstrating the prowess of the religious and pilgrim places, they created even worse and sinful stories.

'...'

'Don't leave any vagina but the mother's!'

"Our authors of the Puranas crossed even this final limit of pornography. Brahma Purana contains the description of a young widow named Mahi having intercourse with her son!

'...'

'She didn't consider him as her son. He too didn't consider her as his mother. Like this, due to providence, the intercourse between the mother and the son happened.'

"How could this great sin be cleansed? Bathing in the Gouthami is the answer. This is the propaganda of the pandas and the sinful tradition of the priests. The five 'P's - Panda, Pandit, Pujari, Purohit and Pouranik- have prepared a cunning and magical register for their own mutual benefit. If their secrets are out, they can't survive, can they?"

Just then, the sound of the bell was heard. Uncle said, "Now look. The story is about to begin. In 'Matsya Purana' it is written like this-

'...'

'One who has interest in other women and he who causes harm to others also will be cleansed and will attain salvation by singing songs in praise of Krishna.'

"Anyone can go and wash his hands in the Ganga water! Where's the obstacle? All right, son! You're getting delayed. Go and get some merit by listening to the story. Otherwise, the story teller may scold you like this –

'...'

'The violin which is immersed in the song announces that the life of those whose ears have no respect for the stories of Krishna, those who have a tongue which does not have interest in describing the qualities of Gopikas, and those who have no devotion to the feet of Yasoda's son, Krishna, is a waste, waste, waste.'

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Chapter 13
DISCUSSION ON GOD

Uncle who was having kali fruit juice saw me and said, “Come, come. Help yourself with some juice.”

“Uncle, your words are sweet and sour like the taste of the juice, isn’t it?” I said.

“Arey, my words are very hot too. Those with weak digestive system cannot digest them. But what can I do? I can’t discard the habit of many years, can I? I can’t talk to please others. I speak my mind openly. That’s why some call me an atheist.”

I said, “Uncle, tell me the truth. Do you agree or not that there is god?”

Uncle smiled and said, “In a manner of speaking, it’s the god who doesn’t accept me. I for one treat him as my uncle.”

I said, “Uncle, you are always witty.”

“Gautama who propounded the legal science made god a potter. Upanishad made god a spider. Vedanta made him a magician. When all that’s not wrong, what’s wrong when I make him my uncle?”

“You make fun of god, don’t you?”

“Surdas made so much fun of Krishna out of friendliness, didn’t he? Should I not do this little bit also?”

“Then, tell me how he becomes your uncle?”

Uncle said, “Look at this. Lakshmi and Daridradevi are sisters. God is Lakshmi’s husband. And I’m the son of Daridradevi. Now tell me what’s his relationship with me?

“God himself said this –

‘…’

‘I serve the worshipper in the same manner as he worships me.’

I said, “Uncle, everything is a joke for you. Without god, how could this creation have been possible?”

“It could, like it happens everyday. In this very place there are thousands of creators.”

“Uncle, you are digressing. My point is that we should accept someone as the first creator, shouldn’t we?”

Uncle said, “I have least objection in accepting it but explain to me this clearly. When did the first creator arrive? Where from? Did he drop from the sky? Or did he wake up suddenly after being asleep for ages and begin to engage in the activity of creation? If he started to create, what was the form he created? Did he create first, woman or man? If it is said that he created the woman first and took forward the activity of creation, then he cannot escape from blame and abuse. On the other hand, if it is that he created first both man and woman, they were siblings. If such were the origins, the mankind is bred in incest. Then how can we talk of the prestige of the clan?

‘…’

‘For a fellow who urinates in Prayaga, he doesn’t attach any value to the Ganges.’

“Who can argue with you Uncle? But there must have been one who began all this creation, isn’t it?”

“Let’s agree that there’s one,” Uncle said. “But what’s he doing now? Whatever is the act of creation, it is continuing now also. In a way, the activity is increasing. Everyday, creation is happening in lakhs. Where’s the need for him to interfere in this now? He can take pension and relax, can’t he?”

I said, “He’s not the kind to keep quiet, would he? He’s omnipresent. ‘…’

Uncle said, “Boy, you are entering into the realm of the Vedanta. Do you know what you are saying? Do you have faith in that?”

“Of course. God is omnipresent. He lives in each and everything.”

Smiling, Uncle said, “Wah rey, Brahmajnani! If god is present in every pot, he must be living in arrack pot also! If ‘Sarvam brahmamayam jagat’ then why can’t we give up Kali stotra and take to totamali stotra? And instead of drinking water which washes Chandi’s feet, why not drink randi’s (prostitute’s)?”

“Uncle, it’s difficult to argue with you. But the god’s glory is limitless. He’s omniscient. All powerful. And an ocean of kindness…”

“Stop, stop. Don’t refer to so many traits in one go. Tell me the meaning of each of them. Why do you think he is omniscient?”

I said, “Because he lives within everyone. Whatever you or I do is because of his wish. ‘…’”

(I’ll do as ordained by god who is presiding in my heart)

Uncle smiled and said, “All right. Stand firm on what you have said and if you don’t, you’ll get a blow with this cane.”

“Okay, I’ll stick to what I said.”

“If god gives everything, that means we are all puppets in his hands. Isn’t that what you said? We will act the way he wills.”

“Surely!”

“If that is so, what’s the difference between a mendicant and a thief?”

I said, “Mendicant does good deeds. So, he’s superior. Thief does bad things. So he’s inferior.”

The moment Uncle heard this, he raised his stick and said, “Take care! What did you say just now?

‘…’

‘I do whatever you order.’

“That means, the way god wishes. What’s the meaning of this? That god does everything. He gives rosary to the mendicant and places the lock in the hand of the thief, isn’t it? If that be so, why is the mendicant superior and the thief inferior? Whatever happens is what the god has ordained, no?”

I said, “Uncle, you trap us in the nutcracker and don’t allow an escape route. But the truth is that the maya of god is boundless. Nothing is impossible for him. He can do anything that he wishes.”

“If that is so, I ask you a question. Answer me. Can god commit suicide if he wishes? Can he die consuming poison or by hanging?”

“Uncle, please tell me why god should think of dying. He takes birth whenever adharma increases on the earth.

‘…’

‘O, Arjuna! Whenever harm is caused to dharma, and adharma is increased, those times I take birth.’

“What is the adharma that he destroys by taking avatar?”

“Violence, adultery and the like.”

Uncle smiled and said, “Do you mean to say that god doesn’t like them?”

“Absolutely.”

Cracking the areca nut, Uncle said, “Then why did the creator create tiger? Why did he give such powerful claws to the lion? Why such sharp teeth to the crocodile? Why did he fill the fangs of the snake with poison? Why a sting to the scorpion? Why did he make dog, cat, jackal, wolf, eagle and vulture carnivores? If he liked non violence, why did he fill the creatures with fighting instincts? He’s the one who sets

fire. Is he the one who also douses it? Is this fair? I ask you another thing. If he really is opposed to adultery, how does he allow the system of public intercourse in one short of eighty-five vaginas? Why did he make creation such a strong desire?

'...'

'Woman is like a ghee pot. Man is like fire.'

"Why did he establish such relationship between man and woman?"

I said, "God has given intelligence to man using which he should weigh sin and merit and travel in the path of dharma."

"If that is so, why should man commit sin at all?"

I said, "In the matter of desires, God made man independent."

Uncle snapped. "Why? Knowing well that the freedom would be misused why did he leave him free? Is it all right to give a sword to a little boy? If he didn't know this little thing, how do you call him 'Omniscient'?"

"Uncle, the deeds of gods are unfathomable. The entire creation is maya of Brahma."

"You are on one hand Brahmavadi and on the other you say there is a difference between sin and virtue. How can both co-exist? If '...' is true, in terms of spirit, Brahma swims in water like fish and the same Brahma becomes a fisherman and catches that very fish. He becomes deceitful and commits deceit and he becomes a judge and sentences. He becomes a prostitute and waits in the balcony and he becomes the molester and molests. I grind bhang and add sugar and drink it. That means Brahma grinds bhang and mixes Brahma in Brahma and drinks it."

"Uncle, you tease the mind."

Uncle said, "You get caught in your own net. You say that god has formed the world basing it on karma; that your deeds determine the results. At another time, you say whatever is destined is bound to happen; that however much we may try, destiny cannot be altered. How could both these happen at the same time? Can it happen that you loudly laugh and keep your mouth tightly shut at the same time? You say that god is omniscient and contradict it by saying that god takes human form whenever dharma is in peril. On the one hand you say god is just to all and on the other hand you say he is partial to his devotees. One time you are an advocate of advaita and at another time you say sin and virtue are two very different things. That's why I say you get caught in the net that you have cast."

Uncle realised that I was in no position to comment. He said, “Say, either this or that. But please make up your mind. Does a prostitute indulge in her deed out of her own volition or is she induced by god? If it is done owing to the inducement by god, then god himself is guilty. If she does it on her own, then delete this sloka –

‘…’

‘I’ll obey and do as you order.’

I said, “Uncle, what do you want me to do? Neither can be dismissed easily. Not a leaf moves without god’s order. But equally it is not correct to blame god for the offence of prostitution.”

Uncle said, “Look at my cane. It’s about to rise. Stick to one thing. Does everything happen because of god’s will?”

I said, “Yes.”

Uncle said, “If I cane you, will it also mean that that too happened at god’s command?”

Since I was again in no state to say anything, Uncle resumed, “Why don’t you speak? If all the incidents happen owing to god’s command, he must be held guilty of all the murders and rapes in the world, isn’t that so?”

“Uncle, god is most kind. He scampered with his Vishnu chakra to rescue Gajendra when he was in trouble. In the Mahabharata, to save a bird, he threw an elephantine bell.”

Uncle said sarcastically, “Was he asleep when lakhs of devotees were crushed to death in Prayaga Kumbhmela? Did his Sudarsana Chakra go blunt? Did he stay plugging his ears with cotton dipped in oil when so many women and children cried piteously? Was it due this that instead of Gajaghanta, Yamaghanta landed there? Or did god go deaf? Then he must get his ears treated.”

I said, “Don’t say that, Uncle. The sinners had to endure difficulties.”

“Do you mean to say then that all those who die in the accidents are sinners? If a crocodile catches and drags someone, do we understand that he was paying for the sins of the past lives? Do we allow him to be taken away like that? Then where was the need for the god to run to rescue the elephant, Gajendra?”

“God is kind to his devotees. “

Uncle said, “That means the god promotes sycophancy. If he wished to be impartial, why did he forsake the feast at Duryodhana’s palace and opt for eating spinach curry at Vidura’s place?”

I said, “Uncle, ‘…’ (Those who approach Him with a particular thought will achieve a result commensurate to the thought.)”

Uncle said, “That means god is like a mean merchant. You pay money and he calculates it on the weighing scale and grants results commensurately. Then what’s the difference between him and the street corner merchant?”

I said, “Uncle, God is embodiment of kindness and his mercy is limitless.”

“Then why can’t he banish all the grief and poverty in the world? Why does he torture people with disease, grief, famine and so on?”

“Grief is the result of karma, Uncle.”

Uncle said, “That means karma is important. Then, where is the room for god to show mercy? Even if he wishes to be kind, he can’t. Can he? If my karma was not appropriate, how would he get the result I seek? On the other hand if karma was good, the fruit of the same is automatic. If that be so, where’s the need for me to suck up to him? That’s why Bartrihari said,

‘…’

‘Salutations to the gods. Since those gods are under the command of destiny, I salute that destiny. Since destiny is the fruit of karma, I worship karma. Since the result is dependant on karma, what business do I have with the gods and destiny? I worship karma which the gods too cannot escape from.’

I said, “Uncle, I believe that God is kindness personified and all powerful.”

Uncle said, “All right. Let’s presume it to be true. If that is so, why can’t he remove the grief in the world? There could only be two reasons for this. One, he doesn’t wish to do so and secondly that even if he wishes it he can’t do it. If he doesn’t wish, then he is unkind. If he can’t, he is incompetent. Then, why do you say he’s kind and all powerful in the same breath?”

I said, “Uncle, you raise such doubts that even a believer too can become sceptical. Finally, tell me this: does god exist or not?”

Uncle smiled and said, “I say he’s there definitely. What has to be settled is whether he’s having fun by creating us or we’re having fun by creating him.”

“Uncle, do you mean to say that god is fictional?”

Putting a pinch of nut powder in his mouth, Uncle said, “No, son. There are true gods. God means –

‘…’

‘Abundance, intelligence, wealth and fame are called ‘bhagam’. A woman who has all these is ‘bhagawathi’ and a man ‘bhagawanthudu.’

“That means, one who has ‘bhagam’ is bhagawanthudu (god). God cannot create without that, like a potter can’t make pots without clay. That way-

‘…’

‘The greater the ‘bhagam’, greater are bhagawantulu. Those who are not endowed with those are ‘abhagawantulu’ or unlucky persons. What creation can they think of?’

I said, “Uncle, under the influence of bhang, you’ll ruin god too. You won’t forsake logic even while you joke, would you?’

Uncle said, “My child, why do you forget that I’m a descendent of both Gangesh Upadhyaya and Gonu Jha? We have a birth right on satire and logic. Take a look at what one of our ancestor’s boast-

‘…’

‘Those who are skilful in delicate poetry can exhibit their scholarliness in using harsh words in logic too. Can those who in ecstasy leave their imprints of their nails on the breasts of woman not rain arrows on the head of an elephant in must?’

“It was in the heat of the power of logic that Udayanacharya, who had defeated the Buddhists in logic, once threw a gauntlet at god when he didn’t have darshaan of Jagannath in Puri-

‘…’

‘O, God! You have neglected me as wealth has made you swollen-headed. But don’t forget that before the Buddhists, your existence is under my control.’

“Likewise, I too wish to say-

‘…’

‘O, God! Why do you hide like a thief? If you are capable, appear before me and prove your capacity.’

“If he was present somewhere, he would have heard me, wouldn’t he? otherwise, this is all a wasted effort. All right, whatever it be, we did discuss about god. That’s enough.

“Isn’t it said that ‘Discussion of god for a ghadiya (24 minutes) or half a ghadiya or half of that would cleanse a crore sins’?”

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Chapter 14
DEBATE ON DHARMA

Bathing in the river, the Pundit was reciting the sloka-

'...'

'I'm the sin; I'm the result of karma; I'm a sinner; I'm born of sin. O, Pundarikaksha, destroyer of all sins, please save me.'

Just then our vikatakavi Uncle went there for bathing. He heard what the Pundit recited and said to him, "O, Pundit, what are you saying? It's this inferiority feeling which has stood in the way of our progress. Why don't you say this instead, -

'...'

'I'm the merit, I'm the result of merit; I'm meritorious; I'm born of merit. O Pundarikaaksha, source of all kinds of merit, be merciful.'

"You declare yourself before god that you are a sinner and seek his protection, don't you? Whom would god protect - a sinner or a person of merit? One more thing. Do you really consider that you are a sinner? Would you approve if others also address you like that? If not, why did you lie to god?"

The pundit was fairly embarrassed. He said, "It's difficult to read any sloka in your presence. Before the protector of the meek and the merciful, we have to lay bare our wretchedness, shouldn't we?"

Uncle said, "O, pundit. There's no relative to a wretched one. Discard this lowness. '...' Say 'let's be without humility' instead."

I said, "Uncle, surrender is the highest form of dharma, isn't it?"

Uncle said, "What's it that you call dharma?"

I said, "I don't have the ability to talk to you on dharma, do I? What all I know is this '...' 'The path traversed by the majority is the path of dharma'."

"You assume that what you have just now stated is an easy thing. It is not, my child. Jaina Mahavira's path was 'ahimsa paramodharmah'. The valiant Hanuman's path was 'sathe satyam samacharet' (demonstrate evil before an evil person). Both were great and worthy of worship. Which one of these two paths do we follow and which one do we forsake?"

I said, "'...' To show kindness to all living creatures is dharma, isn't it?"

Uncle said, “Make it intelligible to me, would you? My cot is full of bed bugs. Do you mean to say that I must allow then to suck my blood all night? There are worms in my stomach. Do you mean to say that I should not take medicine to kill them? Do you mean to say that we shouldn’t use flit on the mosquitoes? If there is a snake at home, should it be allowed to roam free? If we show mercy to all living creatures, can we survive?”

I said, “Can’t we survive without resorting to violence?”

Uncle said, “That’s the rule of nature. ‘…’ ‘One creature is food of another.’ The big fish eat the small fish. The big fish in turn is devoured by a bigger fish. It’s this fish justice which governs the entire world. If the horse befriends grass, what will it eat? There can’t be any friendship between the food and its consumer.”

When I stared at Uncle silently, he resumed, “The fittest survive. If non violence means living the life of being food to others, then the earthworm, which doesn’t harm anyone, should be the biggest non violent creature. Whoever wants to trample on it can do so. I have no faith in such non violence.”

“Uncle, if it’s not possible to show kindness to all creatures, shouldn’t we show mercy at least on some?”

Uncle said, “Do you mean to say all men are worthy of kindness? Assume the enemies have come to occupy our country. Do we have to show mercy on them? Do we have to generously welcome them? Honour them with sharbath, juice, and betel leaves and areca nut? Embrace those who have come to slit our throats?”

I said, “We have to win them over with our love.”

Uncle said, “I don’t understand this. Assume a rascal burgled a house and is molesting a woman. Do we take a hand fan and wave it for him? Sprinkle rose water on him? Place scent bottle before him? Give harati of lighted camphor? And bid him good bye garlanding him?”

I said, “We must reform the enemy.”

Uncle said, “Before we do it, he would have done all the transformation himself. He would hurl such a bomb which would make smithereens of the heart. Chop off like carrot and radish. He would crush women like maida flour. Do we have to allow lion-tailed monkeys to have a free run of the grape garden? Or should the non violent priests sit and do puja like this-

‘…’

‘Salutation to the revered enemy. These flowers, incense, lighted lamp, betel leaves and areca nut and offering of food are only for you.’

“Should songs of love be sung like this-?

‘…’

‘The victorious, wearing the arms and arrows and slaughtering the humans, grant us shelter. Don’t wage war with us. O, valorous, don’t kill us.’

The pundit said, “Manu has prescribed ten attributes of dharma-

‘…’

‘Courage, forgiveness, patience, abstinence from theft, cleanliness, control over the senses, intelligence, education, truth, and absence of anger are the ten attributes of dharma.’

Uncle smiled and said, “All these are effeminate qualities. They are meant for the weaklings. A weak woman will tolerate everything and remain quiet. A weak person will swallow all grief. These dharmas don’t apply to the powerful. If Pandavas sat with patience, why would the War of Mahabharat have been waged? If Rama had forgiven, why would Lanka have been burnt down?”

“If that is so, why were these dharmas established?”

“My child, why are the devotees counselled to be patient? Be content with a dry roti. When scolded, shut your mouth. Don’t allow your mind to be corrupted. Don’t steal anything. Work honestly. Have control over your tongue and other senses. Be alert when working. Don’t get angry when hit. That’s why. The meaning of ‘…’ is only this. This dharma is meant for the students, women and Sudras. The dharma of the competent is different. In Mahabharatha also it is said like this –

‘…’

‘Dharma for the competent is different from dharma of the incompetent.’

“Uncle, what’s dharma of the competent?”

“It’s the way his desire can be fulfilled. It could be with the bullet of a rifle or the strength of a bomb.

‘…’

‘Blame shall not attach a competent person in the same way as the Sun, Fire and the Ganges are blemishless.’

“If a commoner commits murder, he is sentenced. If a soldier dies in war after killing a hundred persons he gets ‘Vir Chakra’. That’s why it is said, ‘there’s no sin in

a group activity.' If a crow dips its beak in water in a cruse, water is defiled. But Ganga is not defiled when hundreds of crows bathe in the Ganges."

The pundit interjected and said, "This is what Vyasa preached –

'...'

"'Vyasa summarised the essence of Astadasa Puranas in two sentences – doing good earns merit and sin by torturing others.'"

I said, "Uncle, we too have believed from the ancient time that doing good to others is meritorious and causing pain is sin, don't we?"

Uncle said, "This too is like adultery. If removing pain of others is dharma, then satisfying the desire of a lustful woman also is dharma."

Pundit glowered, "Your argument is fallacious."

Uncle said, "It's not mine. Kumarila Bhattu said this –

'...'

"You are blaming the disciple, who had intercourse with the guru's wife, don't you? But he did a great service and so he will earn the merit of a good deed.'

"If helping others is dharma then it may be necessary to reckon that a fellow who has intercourse with Guru's wife also as help. Instead of thinking about such questions and answers, you are finding fault with me."

"Uncle, what is your personal view in the matter?"

Uncle smiled and said, "Hey, my opinion on anything has never been constant, has it? Yet, I'll recite a sloka from 'Vikatakavi Purana'-

'...'

"'Vikatakavi gave the essence of Astadasa Puranas in two sentences: Whatever enures benefit to him is punya and whatever enures difficulty for him is sin.'"

I was nonplussed. Uncle said, "The wheel of otherworldliness also runs on the hinge of selfishness. Will anyone give away anything or do a good deed for nothing? It's done for fame and heaven. Everywhere there's some selfishness. When the oil of selfishness is exhausted, then the lamp of otherworldliness will be put out."

"But tapasvis endured lot of difficulties for the sake of dharma, didn't they?" I asked.

Uncle said, "There are some whose mind is strange. They think the more the body is punished, greater the merit. That's why if one does 'Chandrayana Vrata' another performs 'Panchagni Sadhana'. If one stands on one leg, another perches on a

platform. If one sleeps on thorns, another falls silent. Yet another only drinks juice of greens and herbs."

"This is all part of sadhana," said pundit.

"Not sadhana, say, saadh (desire)," said Uncle. "It has something to do with fame, wealth or lust.

'...'

'Man must become somehow become famous, whether by breaking the pot, or by tearing cloths, or by riding a donkey.'

Pandit said, "Abstention is the best of all paths."

Uncle said, "Abstention is for the guileless. Those who are inactive take shelter under passivity. Those who are without hope only act as though they are disinterested. Sacrifice and renunciation are the words uttered by the clueless."

Pandit said, "'...' 'There's no greater solace than contentment'."

"Sir, this is meaningless. Ayachi Mishra of Mithila spent his life with a bag and a quarter of grains eating greens and herbs. There are plenty who praise him. But none of them will refrain from asking for dowry of thousands of rupees for the marriage of his sons."

I asked, "Uncle, what's your opinion on celibacy?"

Uncle smiled and said, "Brahmacharya means an act which is equal to Brahma. Brahma is a neuter gender. That means, brahmacharya means living like an impotent person."

Pundit said, "Don't heckle. Brahmacharya means preservation of the drop.

'...'

'Ejaculation will cause death while retention of semen will mean life.'"

"But in my view," Uncle said, '...' "Ejaculation will mean life and retention will mean death.'

"If all the drops of semen stay in the treasury of man, how will creation happen? It's due to the discharge of semen only that creation occurs, isn't it?"

Pundit said, "Then, do you mean to say that it's foolish to remain a bachelor?"

Uncle smiled and said, "Those who have the capacity can grow as 'brahmachari' taking another meaning for the word. 'Brahma' means independent. That's why 'brahmachari' means the one who roams about freely, in the same way as sanyasi means 'samyak' (in an appropriate manner) 'nyas' renounces. That's why sanyasis renounce all relationships with the society. Some of course abandon relationship

with the cloth and turn 'digambara' or 'nagababa'. Householders labour hard like the oxen whereas viragis become 'Goswamis' and roam about freely like the bulls."

"They practice yoga in a big way, don't they? Do you mean to say all that is a waste?"

Uncle was now in his elements and said, "Then hear this. The goal of all yoga is intercourse. Some believe that by pressing 'nak' (nose) here the door of that 'nak' (heaven) will open; if 'kundalini' (yoga) is aroused here, 'kundalini' (a beauty wearing earlobes) will be available there; and if here 'khechari' (a yoga posture) is practised, a 'khechari' (an angel roaming in the sky) will be available there. Even those who consider woman is the veritable hell also will want to reach the heaven for getting women. With the object of getting Rambha, 'rambha fal' (banana) is offered to god. Wishing to get 'Tilottama' they sprinkle 'tila' (gingili seeds). If it is revealed to everyone that the door of heaven is a fraud, it will be curtains for the drama of worship of all kinds and rituals. If Chandramukhi is not reachable why should hands be washed in Gomukhi and do penance? If Mriganayani is mrigya (not available) why wear 'mrigcharma' (animal hide)? If there is no desire of 'Shodasi' why observe Ekadasi?

I said, "Aha ha! It's raining figures of speech."

Uncle said, "Not just figures of speech but truth too. I only ask one question – If a (vaarangana) prostitute is not likened as a woman prostitute of virtue (varangana) how does she get respect in heaven as 'devangana' (a woman of gods)? Even great sages return to the earth when their merit is over. '…' But angels like Rambha, Urvasi, Menaka and Tilottama remain young forever, stay in heaven and enjoy everyday. Did any respectable woman have such luck?"

I said, "Uncle where's the comparison?"

Uncle said, "There is a difference between the two, like water in cupped hands and water in a great perennial river. If one is embodiment of wretchedness the other is embodiment of generosity. Is a body which serves just one person is a body at all? Blessed is the body which serves many-

'…'

'The wealth of good people is there for the benefit of others.'

Pundit said, "Prostitute is a prostitute. She satisfies the bodily needs and takes money for that."

Uncle said, “A prostitute takes money only now and then; a wife throughout. That’s why she is called ‘bharya’ (whom has she to bear?). The difference is that the wife gives pleasure to just one while the prostitute to many. In Devi Bhagavatam, it is said like this –

‘…’

‘If the contact is with one person, she is a woman of virtue; adulterer if the contact is with two; ‘gharshini’ if it is with three; ‘puschali if it with four; prostitute if it is with five to six; ‘pungi’ if it is with seven to eight and ‘maha vesya’ if the contact is with more than eight! ‘…’ ‘The generous view the entire world as one family.’

Pundit said, “Prostitute goes to the hell.”

Uncle said, “Please read ‘Dharma Sastra’ again. A married woman goes to the heaven when she serves her husband all her life. A slight mistake in serving the husband, or a harsh word uttered would mean that the servants of Yama stuff her mouth with fire-

‘…’

‘A prostitute reaches the heaven straightaway if she offers herself completely to a Brahmin talking to him sweetly.’

‘…’

‘The prostitute has to do whatever is desired by the virtuous Brahmin. She must smilingly offer herself by all means to him.’

‘Lord Vishnu also is kind to the prostitutes. That’s why the path of moksha, liberation, has been made so easy. That’s the reason for the heaven being filled with prostitutes. But there is a big nuisance in this. Dharma will be ruined by going to the heaven!”

The pundit could not control himself. He asked, “Please tell me how dharma will be ruined by going to the heaven?”

Uncle replied, “Look, pundit. Assume that all your ancestors went to the heaven. But the angels they sleep with are the same. Rambha, Urvasi, Menaka and Tilottama who have been for ages giving pleasure to the inmates. That being so, the heaven has to be treated as ‘Bhairavi Kshetra’. That’s why I say dharma will be ruined by going to the heaven.”

“You say this for fun, I know,” the pundit said. “There’s no dharma which is holier than the dharma of being a wife.”

Uncle said smilingly, “The dharma of Nature is stronger than the dharma of a wife. That’s there since the beginning of creation. Marriage is an artificial relationship organised by you and me. Rishis like Uddalaka, son of Swetaketu, have been creating these relationships. Young women like Jabaala have been transgressing them. Dirghatama says that the custom of one husband for a woman did not exist before his time.

‘…’

‘From today I am establishing a rule that a woman will have only one man as her husband throughout her life.’

Pundit said, “You mean being virtuous is not an injunction of god?”

“If that was his order, why did he defile Brinda?”

Pundit said, “That’s Puranic god. I’m talking about Brahma who is nirguna and nirakaaraa.”

Uncle smiled and said, “Sir, why do you drag nirakara Brahma into this? Does he seek pleasure in getting between men and women?”

The pundit was angry. “You are insulting Brahma. Tell me how did the matter of chastity come into being without the command of Brahma?”

Uncle smiled and said, “Look at what Lokayata Darsana says –

‘…’

‘The weak and clever men have established this chastity rule out of jealousy with the object of keeping their wives away from the handsome and valorous men.’

“Another said it more clearly-

‘…’

‘This rule was established to ensure that the weak neck and healthy breast of the woman is beyond the fist of others.’

Pundit said, “You always are out to make fun.”

“That’s true,” Uncle said. “But forgive me Pundit, what you call chastity is actually adultery.”

Pundit was furious. He said, “What you say is gibberish.”

“Sir, ponder over this. What’s adultery? It’s opposed to the norm. What do we call as the norm? It’s a rule which is extremely common. What’s the prevailing norm in the creation? Pregnancy naturally results when man and woman unite. There is no need to blow the conch or blow trumpets for that. To place kumkum where the hair is parted, to tie the thread thrice, et cetera are a part of the same embellishments meant

to catch woman as though she is buffalo and rein her in. That's why the words such as 'mahishi' (she buffalo) have come into vogue."

Pundit remained quiet. Uncle began again. "Look at this. Every creature has sexual freedom. Only man has transgressed this natural law and has held woman within certain bounds in captivity. That's why I call this chastity rule unnatural or adultery."

Pundit finished his bath. He could not argue with Uncle and left reciting 'agharshaka sukta' (a mantra which destroys sins).

I said, "Uncle you are indeed blessed. There's nothing that you can't prove by an argument. But what you say can mean a heavy blow to the chastity rule."

Uncle laughed loudly and said, "Arey, the prattle of a drunken man will land a blow on the chastity rule and nothing happens when the Smrithkaras openly encourage adultery. Is this what you want to say?"

"Uncle, what do you mean? Is there mention of adultery in 'smritis'?"

Uncle said, "Hear this to understand what all is said in the smritis-

'...'

'A woman shall not be blamed for adultery.'

'...'

'A woman is cleansed when she menstruates.'

"Hear this too-

'...'

'A woman who is pregnant of union with a man of unequal varna should not be forsaken. At menstruation after delivery, she will be cleansed and will become like pure gold.'

'...'

'Women and gold will be cleansed with the rays of the sun, the moon and the air.'

'...'

'No blame shall attach women, the old and children like there can be no blemish in the running water and dust particles which fly in the air.'

"My son, the smritikaras changed their prescriptions in tune with the changing social circumstances. That's why they said –

'...'

'There are many srutis and many smritis. The prescription no sage can be taken as valid for all times.'

I said, "Uncle, don't you believe in the heaven?

Uncle replied, “How do I believe until at least one has returned from the heaven and told me? Nobody has come back until now. Those who speak of it have not gone and therefore how to believe their words?”

I said, “If there is no truth in it, how has the belief survived for so long?”

Uncle said, “Son, man is not content with the pleasures enjoyed on the earth. There is no limit to desire. But life-span is limited. Physical ability has limits. Very soon old age is reached. The game is over. But carnal desire remains intact. That’s why men create the flower in the sky and mentally devour delicious sweetmeats. They daydream that ‘The place of abode after death has food which is equal to ambrosia and celestial damsels for intercourse.’ Heaven has become not the abode of gods but of the in-laws. In the in-laws’ place, there’s authority only on one shodasi, girl of sixteen years, but in heaven there are sixteen thousand shodasis. And all of them are young and ageless. Besides, there’s no brother-in-law or father-in-law to hover around there. Where can one find a more convenient place for romance?”

“Uncle, you can trifle everything. But tell me what is dharma?”

Uncle said, “Arey, ‘…’ ‘Each unto himself.’ If one says ‘…’ ‘Dharma is to protect oneself’, another says ‘…’ ‘Creation depends on dharma’. According to Kanada ‘…’ ‘The thing which yields progress and fame is dharma’. Jaimini defines ‘…’ ‘Thing that promotes good deeds is dharma’.”

“Uncle, which definition do you agree with?”

“I accept all the definitions. But my interpretation is different. Dharma to me is that which gives protection to oneself, that which leads to assume bodily form, that which leads to extreme joy and that which allows the creation to continue.’

“But our preachers of dharma have said ‘…’ ‘There’s no greater dharma than the truth’, didn’t they?”

Uncle said, “That’s untrue. Assume someone has come with sword to kill you and you are hiding behind a bush. At that time do I state the truth? What’s dharma there? Is it protection of truth or dharma?”

I said, “Then what is permanent dharma? I’m at a loss to know.”

Uncle said, “This has not become intelligible to the stalwarts too. That’s why it is said – ‘…’ ‘The essence of dharma is hidden in the cave’. But it is not possible to lay bare the secret of that dharma without entering in the cave.”

When I was looking at him nonplussed, Uncle resumed and said, “Arey, my son! Why do you get entangled in this? There is nothing like dharma which is applicable

to everyone in every way for all times. All dharmas are dependent on others. They are dependent on the circumstances. There are no dharmas which are not dependent on anything and which remain in the same way always. In Mahabharatha, it has been said clearly –

'...'

'Dharma varies depending on the place and the time. There's no dharma which is useful to everybody at all times.'

I said, "If that is so, why were so many dharma sastras made?"

Uncle smiled and said, "My son, -

'...'

'Dharma sastras were made for the dimwits. Those who have intelligence will find out their path of well being themselves.'

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Chapter 15.
THE EXORCIST

That day Vikatakavi Uncle was seen grinding bhang. He saw the tantrik beside me and asked, “Who’s he?”

I said, “He’s Ozha. An evil spirit has entered Chowdari’s bungalow. Ozha has come to drive it away.”

Uncle smiled and said, “He’s a big evil spirit himself. Can there be an end to the difficulties of those whom he possesses?”

Ozha glared at uncle and said, “I’m a tantrik, an exorcist. I have attained control over the mantras after being in Kamakhya for twelve years. There’s nothing that I can’t do?”

Uncle said, “I will make a leech catch your nose. Can you with the power of your mantra drive away a leech? I will hold a paisa in my fist. I will agree that you have the power if you can make it disappear with your mantra and tantra, will you?”

Sensing that the situation was not conducive, the tantrik slipped off quietly from there.

I said, “The tantrik says the bride is possessed by a ghost.”

Uncle sported a smile. “My son, old Chowdary unfortunately married again and has brought an elephant in must. Is it then a surprise that at night a ghost gets on top of Chowdary’s wife?”

I said, “Everything is a joke for you, uncle.”

“If this is not something to laugh at, what else is? There is a saying that - ‘A weak fellow’s wife is the sister-in-law of the whole colony’. The ghost too must have desired to come here and become the brother-in-law, couldn’t it?”

“Uncle, do you believe in the evil spirits?”

Uncle said, “Why not? I believe in ‘bhutam’, ‘vartamanam’ and so on.”

“I don’t mean that ‘bhutam’.”

“Then what?”

“The ghost that possesses human beings.”

Uncle thought for a while and said, “Yes. I believe in that ghost too. Even now that ghost is perched sitting atop your head.”

I said, “Uncle, you are sarcastic. But Padma Purana contains descriptions of the evil spirits in plenty, isn’t it?”

Mixing black pepper in bhang, Uncle said, “That evil spirit surely is perched on your head and is speaking. It must have sat on the heads of mighty scholars also. Whenever you question them, their reply is ‘It’s written like this and that’. They need to be told ‘O, great one. Let what’s written be what it is. Have you ever written that you are their servants? What happened to your sense? Have you pledged it somewhere? When people of other countries are inventing new machines, you say that you won’t swerve from the path of your grandfathers, why?”

I said, “Once upon a time, there was science in our country also. There was aeroplane too…”

Uncle was irritated. He said, “That ghost is still speaking. The ghost of the past. The elephant has gone. The place where elephants were tied also is gone. But we still are holding the goad and sitting just to say that once upon a time there was an elephant tied in front of our house also. My son, what’s the point in talking about the past? What’s needed is to see what is there now, shouldn’t we? The tamarind is not there but its taste still is lingering. People of other countries have marched forward a great deal. But we sleep on the cot boasting ‘once upon a time we were flying in the sky’. When people of other countries look to the future, we look backwards, at bhutkal. How can we push forward unless we discard this ghost?”

“I know you don’t believe in ghosts and phantoms. But we witness so many possessed by the devil. How come?”

Mixing a fistful of *soamf* in bhang, uncle said, “Arey, that’s the fear of the ghost. That’s all. On a dark night in a deserted place seeing a thief or an adulterer many start reciting Gayatri mantra or eulogy of Hanuman. Taking krishnabhisarika (a heroine who goes to a secret place wearing dark dress on a dark night to meet her paramour) for a ‘yakshini’, they are frightened to death. If anyone prattles because of mental instability, it’s assumed that a ghost is speaking. If anyone throws a stone or a brick in front of the house, it’s said that the ghost has caused trouble. On a dark night in a deserted place if a light is seen it’s an ogre; if it’s a snake it’s ghost snake. If it is not known how fire is kindled, it’s ‘bhahmagni’. It’s all due to blind belief. That’s all.”

“Uncle, you have no interest in other worldly matters. But there are wizards who have control over the devil and get to know everything. They can cause death with a mantra. They can roll a dice and take control of a snake. They can turn a wheel and

detect a thief. They can overpower a Betala and get articles they wish for. With the power of mantra, they can cause death, cast a spell or exorcise a devil."

Uncle who was grinding bhang with his head lowered raised his head and said, "Untrue. Totally untrue. If at least one of these was true, I would have publicised it beating a drum. The government would have employed the fellow who turned the wheel instead of CID police. The irrigation minister would have caused rains by reciting mantra and doing japa. Our external affairs minister would have appointed devils in place of the ambassadors. The defence minister would have cast a spell against the enemy. Crores of rupees spent on the army would have been saved. When the country is attacked the tantriks would have lined up against the enemy army. And when they said the mantra, 'aam fat', the enemy would have been reduced to ashes. When the plague spread, the health minister would have mrityunjaya mantra recited –

'...'

'I worship Triyambak Siva who makes aroma and vigour to increase.'"

I said, "Uncle, the tantrik is procuring many items to secure release of the ghost. Mustard seeds, dung of black cow, ash, hair of a black horse!"

Rolling bhang into a ball, Uncle said, "This is absolute fraud. Tell me what is the cause and effect between the ghost and the hair of a black horse?"

I said, "The world of mantra and tantra is clothed in secrecy. That's why the tantrik rids the bride of the ghost at night when there is no one around."

Tapping the ground with his walking stick Uncle said, "I call this a crime. The education in the other countries is publicised by the drum beat whereas in our country it's talked of in whispers. A thief can never tolerate light. Trickery is carried out in darkness. The science of foreign countries is dazzling brightly. The entire world went into raptures at the discovery of radio and television. If on the contrary a thing like radio was discovered by a scholar of our country, you wouldn't know how he would have behaved. He would have said that the radio was broadcast straight from the Brahma Lok. He would have made a householder bathe with his cloths on, take him to the deserted burial ground on a no moon night, made him listen to something on the radio and made him believe that that was the voice of a dead man and would have squeezed him all his life. He would have made radio look like Chandika, cover it with a red cloth, sprinkle grains of rice (akshatalu) and red vermillion, recite inane mantras and would have hid it without revealing the truth to

anyone. And just before dying, he would whisper the secret into his son's ear and make him an expert in that."

I said, "Uncle, in your view, is mantra nothing but deceit?'

Continuing to grind bhang, Uncle said, "Son, mantra means advice. If a woman is unable to conceive I would advise her to go for uterus examination. That's the correct mantra. Instead, if I say 'Sun is sitting on the uterus door and until he does not get away from there you cannot conceive' that would amount to fraud. Further if I say 'To please the Sun god, arrange twelve Brahmins to recite "Om ghrinih suryaya namah" six thousand times a day after a feasting on halwa and puris" that will amount to a greater fraud. Add to this advice 'The wheel of Sun's chariot is stuck up a little bit and so to pull it up we need droppings of an owl, camel dung, bat's droppings, the horse shoe, red gem, and twelve tolas gold' then it will amount a much greater fraud. These wretched rascals only go about the world as miracle men. 'Sri 108' is added to their name at the beginning. If I had the authority I would have dragged them to court under section 420 for cheating."

"Uncle, all those who perform mantra- tantra are rascals, are they?"

Uncle said, "Son, all of them are cheats and conmen. They live on deceit. You remember this sloka in my 'Vikatakavi Purana' –

'...'

'Tantrik, mantrik, palmists, those who give the results of signs and those who make predictions are cheats and pakands.'"

I said, "Then Uncle, are mantra-tantra a myth?"

Mixing sugar in bhang, Uncle said, "In fact, tantra means chemistry. A mixture of two things results in creation of a new thing which has different qualities. It's due to this science that the people of foreign countries have attained such heights in technology. We on the contrary are tricksters who create useless things and say that through mantra and tantra convert soil into sugar and stone into gold and such humbug. That's all."

Uncle understood that I was surprised and so he said, "Here in the name of tantra, mantra, yoga, magic and sorcery the ocean of deceit is welling up. Look at the mantra-tantra ideas suggested in Agni Purana to vanquish the enemy-

'...'

‘Pound the enemy with your weapon. Pulverise.’ After reciting this mantra for 108 times, if the damaruk is sounded, the enemy army will go helter-skelter. The soldiers will run away dropping their weapons.’

“Listen to Chamundadevi mantra –

‘...’

‘If this mantra is under your control, Chamundadevi with her trushul will slash, cut your enemies and beat with the cane. She will tie them up with a rope. She will drive a dagger. She will reduce the enemy to dust. She will eat up.’ Those with atom bombs will all be defeated. Now tell me. Will any country have a defence against such mantras?”

When he found me stupefied, Uncle said, "People will be shocked when they know the kind of tricks that our mantra tantra talk of. Sample this –

‘...’

‘No weapon can touch the body if it is smeared with the paste of aapaamurga herb on an auspicious day.’

“An enemy becomes impotent with this trick of Dattatreya. Good riddance. Hear this –

‘...’

‘On Saturday or Wednesday bury a chameleon where the enemy urinates. That’s all. The enemy turns impotent. Sankara himself revealed this secret.’

“If a woman has to be subjugated, recite this mantra –

‘...’

“That’s it. She will run and fall in your lap. Shabash. What else?”

‘...’

‘On Pushya nakshatra day, give rudra jata root by placing it in the betel leaf. The moment she takes it, she becomes your slave.’

“My son, there is yet another trick. With that not only your lover but her father too will start pressing your legs. –

‘...’

‘If white jilledu and ox gall is ground and mixed in own urine and applied on forehead as tilak, everyone who sees it will become his servant.

“What no formula can achieve is accomplished with urine, isn’t it?”

Uncle smiled and said, “My dear, don’t conduct any of these experiments. Be careful otherwise you will land in trouble. Leave these things to tantrik.”

I said, "If he really has such powers, would he have been loafing like this? Alas! He has no roof over his house."

Uncle said, "Then tell him to apply tilak of donkey's fat."

When he found me staring at him, Uncle said, "I'm not saying this for fun. It's said in this tantra like this -

'...'

'If anyone applies tilak of a mixture of donkey's fat, haratal and manhsila, he'll become a king like the king of Lanka.'

"I wonder why they don't patent the tricks that they have invented!"

"Uncle, why are there such nonsensical things in the tantras?"

"Tantras are full of such experiments in abhichara and adultery, one more ludicrous than the other, to dupe people and fulfil their selfish interests. 'You can roam about unseen on a particular star, if you recite so-and-so mantra and by keeping a particular herb in the mouth.' If this is true, our riffraff would have lived in trains without noticed by the T.C. Sweetmeat shops would have gone bankrupt. Everyday the tantriks would have had tasty food free of cost. They would have visited any in-laws' house and would have had feast. When there is such a tantra who would care for prajatantra?"

"I'm surprised to hear all this, Uncle."

Uncle said, "We have broken world record in our creativity and boasting. It's just not the human beings but the cows of our country also knew mantra-tantras. Hear the super natural power of Kapila Cow –

'...'

'From its mouth, three crores of people brandishing swords, from the nose five crores with spears, from the eyes one hundred crores sporting arrows and bows, from udder crores holding staves, from the hooves crores of instrumentalists, from anus crores of barbarians emerged.'

"Now tell me. Has such a cow been born anywhere in the world so far? That's why I say there is none to equal us. In our society, even dog is a vehicle of a god (Bhairava). Owl and donkey too are vehicles of goddesses (Lakshmi and Sitala Devi). Owl is of use in tantrik experiments. See what's written in Dattatreya Mantra –

'...'

'One can read a book in dark if collyrium made of owl's skull, ghee and water is applied to the eyes.'

“It’s for owl-like people that such tricks are useful!”

I said, "Uncle, the tantrik is preparing a machine for the bride.”

Mixing bhang well, Uncle said, "Don’t call it a machine. Call it a conspiracy instead. With the help of this machine, one can fly in the sky; hills can be broken; ocean can be controlled; rain can be made and electricity can be created. All these machines have been invented by the people of other countries. In fact, it can be said that the machine known as Betala has been overpowered by them. Machine ploughs the land; pounds paddy; cooks food; weaves cloths; carries loads; turns the fan; plays songs and takes one for a trip in the sky. We import all the machines from abroad. What machine can we give in return for them? At best, our tantriks can pull out a hair, make talisman out of it and send it labelling it as ‘siddhi Vinayaka yantra’.”

Finally I asked again, “That means, you have absolutely no faith in ghost mantra?”

Uncle said, "Son, when did we know about ghost mantra? The ones who really know about ghost mantra are the foreigners. They have taken control of the five elements known as the earth, water, fire, sky and air and out of them whatever they need. They are winning over water, earth and the sky. Look at us. We roam about searching for the hair of a black horse while hunting fake evil spirits! The country can be better off only after we make bhasmibhuth (ash) of foolishness bhuth (evil spirit) which is sitting atop us and riding us. Isn’t it because of that I worship Siva, who is Bhuthnath.”

After saying this, Uncle raised his bhang glass and drank it as an offering to Siva.

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Chapter 16.

LUNAR ECLIPSE

On the eve of the lunar eclipse the villagers were bathing in the river at night while our Wisecrack Uncle sat in the backyard around the bonfire, driving away the cold. When I saw him I asked, "Uncle, won't you take a bath after the eclipse?"

"Arey! It's the winter season. Thick dew is falling. Do I have to go for a bath at midnight? Has a mad dog bitten me or what to do that?"

"But please take a look at the crowd at the river bank, Uncle," I said.

Uncle was shivering. "O! My god! This cold wind is blowing in gusts. The water also is so cold. Fingers freeze at the slightest touch of water. Yet thousands of women and men are bathing with water reaching up to the chest! Children are shivering. Men are freezing. Dainty women are struggling to stand erect. Gusts despatched by the easterly wind are entering their blouses like arrows, piercing their breasts. Despite it, hoping for *punya*, merit, they are vying with each other in bathing."

"So, you won't take a bath, would you?" I asked Uncle.

Uncle said, "Arey, son! The earth's shadow falls on the moon. That's all that is there to the eclipse. After sometime, the shadow would pass. And because of that why should I take a dip in the water? Do you want me to go mad like the villagers there?"

"Look at the priest there, Uncle," I said. "He has closed his eyes and is saying his prayer. This time he has been told not to witness the eclipse. That's why he won't look up."

"What would happen if he looked up?"

"Death," I said.

"Death is inevitable to everyone. Does it go away if the eyes are shut or if japa '...' is recited?"

"But this time, Uncle, the prediction is mrityuyoga for him."

"Arey! I have lost count of mrityuyoga that I have crossed since my childhood. I did not say the prayer, 'Om sum sah'. Yet, mrityuyoga could not pluck a single hair out of me. If death is the consequence of not propitiating the planets, then countries like England, Turkey, Afghanistan and Baluchistan should have been turned into

burial grounds long ago. And only a few persons like the very wise priest would have continued to glorify *Bharathakhanda* in *Jambu dweepa*."

"Do you mean to say that the astrological predictions and remedies to propitiate the planets are all humbug?" I asked.

"Just think for a while. This time your aunt's zodiac forecast says 'death of wife'. The great man who gave the prediction did not even consider how such forecast could be valid in the case of women, children and unmarried people? Bad tidings are deliberately built into Zodiac forecasts. If worry, grief, injury, loss of prestige and the like are not forecast, how else would these rascals (astrologers) be able to fulfil their needs in the name of neutralising evil effects? Believe me, it's not the moon that is subject to eclipse. It's actually we who are the victims of the eclipse."

"How's that so, Uncle?"

"Listen. We are told that eclipse means we are defiled. Like defiling at birth and death, defiling at the eclipse too. No food and water right from an hour before the eclipse begins. Throw out the earthen pots. Take a bath. Say the prayers. Perform remedial rituals. Give away money and other things to the Brahmins. These scoundrels have used the eclipse also as an instrument of extortion."

Just then, loud yells of 'Donate to the eclipse' rent the air.

Uncle resumed and said, "Look at how the relatives of Rahu are creating a racket in their quest to extract their bribe! After the bribe is placed in their palm, they claim to recommend Rahu to release the moon! Until then the ogre would hold the moon tightly with his horns! Look at how money rains there! What intelligence! What intelligence!!"

"Uncle, do you say that all this is blind faith?"

"Any doubt about that? Today there would be fairs all over the country. In places like Kasi and Prayaga, there will be waves of the sea of human heads. It's difficult to count how many children would be lost, how many old women would be sacrificed in the melee and how many young women would be crushed. Can there be such mad religious jostling anywhere else? In other countries, not a farthing is spent on such occasions. But in our country, crores of rupees go down the drain. If this money is spent on the land, we wouldn't have to import food grains from other countries. But we rain money on the shadow of the land. There's no food to eat. No money in the waistcloth. But in the name of religion we are ahead of all others in

taking a dip in the river. It's due to this religious frenzy that many attain paramapada (death)."

"Uncle, how did we become so foolish?"

"The priests are the cause of this," Uncle declared.

"Uncle, come on, please. How could the priests be the cause of our foolishness?"

"Listen to me. They got hold of some *vidya*, knowledge. That's about the eclipses. These days even an ordinary student who has some knowledge of maths would know about the eclipses. But in the days of yore, that knowledge was their perennial succour. The sun and the moon became silver and gold for them. The blind faith that 'When these priests can know what happens in the sky, why would they not know about the events on the earth?' began to take firm root among the people. Then the priests too began to playact as all-knowing types. With lunar eclipse, they began to fix the auspicious time for marriage also. Gradually they became contractors for all the planets. Thereafter in the name of *grahas*, the planets, they began the business of *dravya grahanam*, extorting money. Magic is always fantastic, isn't it? Look at the dramatic way they accept the donations. White things such as silver, pearls, conches, rice, curd, ghee, camphor, sandal, white cloths and white oxen in the name of the moon! In the name of Sani, they take black articles such as black stones, black cloths, iron, til seeds, cereals, buffaloes and black cow. Red coloured articles such as gold, copper, precious stones, sapphires, wheat, jaggery, saffron, red cloths and red complexioned calf in the name of the sun. What poetry have they woven? It may cost the householder a lot of money but to those who wove the poetry, it turned into 'athakari' (money earning ploy). Likewise, they opened account books in respect of every planet. Thanks to the munificence of these nine planets, *ashta dhatu* rings adorn the fingers of the priests. Curved bracelets shine on the shoulders of their women. Astrology may or may not have helped others but in the case of priests, it helped them immensely."

'Uncle, look there. Chowdary's wife is donating a pot of ghee."

"She is not the kind who ordinarily gives away even a tola of ghee. But our tricky priests have compelled her to donate a whole pot of ghee by virtue of the magic web that they have created. Just see what kind of web they have woven, -

'…'

'For overcoming *nadi*, nervous blemish, donate a pot of ghee placing a conch of rarefied butter atop the pot during the lunar eclipse!'

"These priests have caught hold of the householders' nadi so comprehensively that they have been made 'anadis' (innocent). Not only the nadi of the people but they also hold their 'nari' (woman) in their fists."

"Uncle, you always spice up your talk with doses of figures of speech, don't you?"

"No figure of speech, son. What I say is the truth. The priests have caught the hair of the householders too in their hands."

Looking at the expression of bewilderment on my face, Uncle picked up Mithila state almanac from the windowsill and said, "Take a look.

'...'

'The auspicious time for the women to comb their hair and tress or to make a bun is Ashwini, Ardhra, Pushya and Punarvasu.'

"Why not Bharani, Krittika, Rohini, Mrigasira stars? Would the astrologer's home be doomed had the doe-eyed woman made a bun of her hair in Mrigasira star? The priests don't tie their tuft after looking at the almanac, do they? In that case, why should women comb their hair after checking the almanac?"

"I didn't know that the almanac has such things too, Uncle."

Pushing the almanac towards me, Uncle said, "If you care, please check for yourself the titles in bold letters.

'...'

'...'

'...'

'...'

'When should the new daughter-in-law get into the kitchen? When should the women clip her nails after delivery? When should women wear lac bangles? When should the child be breast-fed?'

"Muhurat has been fixed for such like things. Many stalwarts have put their seal of approval on this almanac. Look at the names of the scholars printed on this."

"Uncle, why should those scholars get involved in such black magic? Should they not use their brains for better purpose?"

"Why would I cry hoarse if our scholars were of that kind? They exhibit their scholarship on matters such as '...' (the results of shaking of the woman's organ). 'If a

woman's thigh shakes, she will obtain love. If her waist shakes, she would fall in love with a scoundrel. If it's navel, her husband would die…' By making such an almanac, they have taken control of all the five sensory organs of women!'

"The almanac also has some important things, such as vrishto yog, predictions, during the year," I said.

Opening the almanac, Uncle said, "Let's see that too. This is 'Parabhava' year. The forecast for the year is written as below—

'…'

"That means, in Parabhava year, the people would be tormented. Everyone would be afflicted by fear."

"So, this year will not be all right."

"But the presiding ruler of the year is Brihaspati. And the forecast because of that is written as below—

'…'

"That means, the country will prosper with wealth, food grains and cattle. There will be plenty of rainfall. Diseases will disappear. The kings and Brahmins will be busily engaged in their duties. Thieves, tigers and snakes will not trouble anyone."

"That means, the year will be good. The people will be saved of all difficulties," I said.

"Wait for a while. This year there is the sun named Samvahaka. The prediction because of that is written as below-

'…'

"That means, this year there will be loss of wealth. People will be afflicted by diseases. Clouds will not drop water. Seeds would not yield."

"Does it mean that the people will be completely destroyed by famine and starvation?" I asked.

"Wait, wait. The name of the cloud this year is Samvartaka. The result of that is as below-

'…'

"That means, this year, the rains will be copious. Harvest will be good. The earth will be quenched of its thirst for water. The sky will always be overcast."

"Uncle, why should such contradictory things be written in the almanac?"

"This is the real trickery. The web has been so woven that no result can ever go against the prediction. If it rains, it's due to Samvartaka cloud. If it's famine, it's

because of Samvahaka sun. Flood at one place and famine at another. It's not easy to fathom their tricks, son."

"Uncle, the magazines too publish predictions. Are they also of the same kind?"

"Absolutely! Just think of this. Income and expenditure, grief and happiness, pleasure and pain are daily occurrences. The predictions on thse events are slightly altered this way and that, added or deleted somewhat and proffered to Aeries or Taurus to deceive gullible people. Reckon those who deceive as makara (crocodile) and those who are deceived as vrishbha (ox)."

My face showed surprise and Uncle caught on. "Look, my zodiac sign is Leo. The prediction for the week for me is a lavish feast. Imagine, everyone ate the same food cooked at my home. There are those of kumbha rasi, Gemini. But why is that a feast was not predicted for them? There would be crores of people with Leo zodiac sign. There would be many beggars also among them. They would not have had kubhojanam at all. There would be many patients among them. Poor things, they wouldn't even eat anything. But why would those who write the predictions think of them! Whether or not anyone had a meal, these astrologers never forgot to make excellent arrangements for their food."

"So, these predictions are all midutambhatla predictions, trash. Are they?"

"Of course! If an astrologer comes to me, within one minute, I'll prove his fraud."

"How, Uncle?"

"I'll ask a simple question, 'I have a wood apple in my hand. Will I put it in my mouth or not?' With this, he will start sweating. Astrologers and tantriks don't come to me for fear of being exposed, isn't it?"

"But, Uncle, I believe the almanac has many things which would startle even science, does it?"

Uncle smiled and said, "There's no doubt about it. There are many things in that which would make the scientists go crazy. For example, when would the earth sleep? When would there be fire in the sky? And when in the underworld? Which year would Durga arrive riding an elephant? And which year on a palanquin? When would Shiva ride the ox? When would he take a stroll with Parvathy? Look at what is written about Krishna chaturdasi – '...' That means, that day worship Shiva who has

been hurt by Manmadha's arrow. Tell me, which country's calendar will speak of such things?"

"Uncle, I can't answer you."

"Son, these astrologers are the gods who have to be worshipped. '…' (son-in-law is the tenth planet), so goes the saying. But I would say, '…' (the astrologer is the tenth planet). The astrologers of other countries examine the planets and the stars minutely with the help of telescopes. Our astrologers don't stir out of their home ant yet make a pile for themselves.

'…'

"That means, if the moon is in the front, there's income. If it's on to the left, loss will enure. That's why while the Americans land on the moon and fetch samples of the rock from there, we say 'Chathurthee chandraya namah' and show bananas to the moon from here itself."

"Uncle, this is quite shameful."

"Son, we have made the moon like chandrakantha in the magical book. Earlier, the words that we heard in Krishna's 'Mother, I want the moon' and in poetry, 'the poor chakora bird is in love with the moon' were all impossible things and fictional. Science has made all that possible. Now a child can be given moon as a toy. Chakora bird can meet the moon. Now the beautiful women would not be moon-faced but away from the moon. 'Can you spit on the moon?' was the adage. That has become possible now."

"You are saying all these at the time of lunar eclipse, Uncle, aren't you afraid?"

"I'm stating the truth. Today when the scientists of other countries have gone to the moon and are preparing the maps of the troughs and plateaus there, our scholars are still praising the moon with words such as 'Sasanka' and 'Mriganka'. Even if they are taken to the moon, they will start searching for the deer and the rabbits there. They have blamed the moon for many things. In fact, the moon is not to be blamed for them. We're actually blameworthy. We shudder looking at our own shadow. What could be more foolish than this?"

"Uncle, look at there. The moon is totally eclipsed. Now he would be released."

"True. But we would really be freed when we come out of the clutches of our foolishness known as Rahu.

'…'

‘Bharat is in the grip of foolishness known as Rahu. It’s not known when and how it would be freed of that.’”

Just then near the river bank, the music of shehnai was heard.

Uncle said, “It’s difficult to change the herd mentality. We can’t hear the music of koel amid the sounds of the drums, can we? All right. Go. Go and have a dip in the exploitation that goes on there. Otherwise, you might blame me that you missed an opportunity because of me.”

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